

THE WINDOW OVER THE WAY

By the same Author

THE PATIENCE OF MAIGRET
MAIGRET TRAVELS SOUTH
MAIGRET ABROAD
MAIGRET TO THE RESCUE
MAIGRET KEEPS A RENDEZ-VOUS
MAIGRET SITS IT OUT
MAIGRET AND M. L'ABBE
IN TWO LATITUDES
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BLACK RAIN
CHIT OF A GIRL
A WIFE AT SEA
STRANGE INHERITANCE
POISONED RELATIONS
MAIGRET ON HOLIDAY
THE STRANGERS IN THE HOUSE

Georges Simenon

THE WINDOW
OVER
THE WAY

Translated from the French by
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I
THE WINDOW
OVER THE WAY

Translated from the French

Lcs Gens d'en Face

“WHAT! Do you mean to say you have white bread?”

The two Persians, the consul and his wife, went into the drawing-room, and it was the latter who couldn't help exclaiming at the marvellous assortment of sandwiches invitingly displayed on the table.

Barely a minute earlier Adil Bey had been told:

“There are only three consulates in Batum, yours, ours, and the Persian's. But the Persians are quite impossible people.”

It was Signora Pendelli who had said that, while her husband, the Italian consul, lounged in an easy chair, smoking a thin rose-tipped cigarette.

Standing in the middle of the drawing-room, the two women greeted each other with the utmost cordiality. And at exactly that moment the noise outside, which so far had been no more than a vague murmur in the sun-baked town, suddenly swelled, and a band struck up at the corner of the street.

With that, everyone moved on to the veranda to watch the procession pass.

Adil Bey was new to the place, in fact he had arrived in Batum that very morning. At the Turkish consulate, he had found Fikret, the man from Tiflis who had been acting as consul pending his arrival.

The latter, who was leaving that evening, had brought Adil Bey round to the Italians to introduce him to his two colleagues.

The music came closer and they could see the glitter of the sun on the brass instruments. The tune that was being played was not exactly a gay one, but there was plenty of go in it. The air, the houses, everything fairly throbbed with its rhythm.

After a moment Adil Bey noticed that the Persian consul and Fikret were back in the room, standing together talking in an undertone.

Turning back towards the street he studied the procession. Behind the band, borne on the shoulders of six men, was a bright red coffin,

"Is it a funeral?" he asked innocently, turning to Signora Pendelli.

He looked quite alarmed, and his hostess had to bite her lip to suppress a laugh.

It was indeed a funeral, the first Adil Bey had seen in Russia. The men in the band were dressed like a team of athletes, all in white, with gym shoes and large red cockades over their hearts. The coffin was badly planed and badly painted a blinding red. As for the crowd, it followed as a crowd always will follow a band. There were men in their shirt-sleeves or in pullovers, bare-legged women in white cotton frocks. Only two men had jackets, collars, and ties, no doubt because they had important parts to play in the ceremony. Many heads were shaved. Bringing up the rear was a young man on a beautiful new bicycle, zigzagging to keep his balance at a walking pace. Sometimes he steadied himself by grasping a girl's shoulder.

In front of the consulate all heads were turned to inspect the foreigners on the veranda.

"What are they thinking?" muttered Adil Bey under his breath.

Hearing him, the Persian consul's wife, Mme Amar, answered cynically:

"That we have white bread to eat!"

She laughed. The men in the procession saw her laugh, but the look on their faces did not change. They went past, following the music and the red coffin, and nobody could possibly say whether they were happy or sad. Ill at ease, Adil Bey went back into the drawing-room.

"Have you been round the town?" asked Mme Amar, following him.

"I haven't seen anything yet."

"It's an awful hole."

She looked straight into his eyes. Hers were coal black and they were the most brazen eyes he had ever seen. No one had ever looked at him like that before. She might have been examining an object, wondering whether or not it was worth buying. It was quite obvious what she was thinking:

"He's not too bad, nor too good either. . . . Perhaps a bit stupid."

Finally she said out loud:

"You know, we're condemned to see a lot of each other. There are only six of us here, you see. And that's including John of the *Standard*, who's always drunk anyway."

She turned to her hostess to ask:

"By the way, isn't John coming?"

They were all back in the room now. The last of the procession was disappearing at the end of the street, though the air still hummed with the music. The heat was stifling.

"Are you off already?" asked Signora Pendelli.

The man from Tiflis was preparing to go.

"I've got a train to catch. . ."

She turned to the Persian consul.

"But you haven't."

"I've got a little matter to discuss with him. I'll be back in a minute. Excuse me. . ."

Adil Bey was too much of a stranger amongst them to take any great part in the conversation. Holding his cup in his hand, he sat diffidently between the two ladies, facing Pendelli, who was fat and panted for breath in the heat.

The room was large, well furnished and carpeted like any other drawing-room, with pictures on the walls. Besides the sandwiches on the table, there were cakes and a bottle of vodka. The veranda gave on to a sun-baked terrace which sent in waves of heat.

The street was deserted now. With a sigh, Pendelli asked:

"Do you speak Russian?"

Gazing at the sandwiches, he didn't seem to be addressing anybody in particular, but Adil Bey answered:

"Not a word."

"So much the better."

"Why?"

"They prefer consuls not to understand their language. So that's one point in your favour."

Pendelli spoke condescendingly as though it was awfully decent of him to take the trouble. Mme Amar went on studying the new

arrival, while Signora Pendelli performed her duty as a hostess by keeping a vague smile on her lips.

"I suppose the flour's sent to you in your own ships. . . ."

The music seemed to Adil Bey to be approaching again, but this time at the back of the house. In a somewhat aggrieved tone Mme Amar went on:

"It must be nice to be an Italian Consul and have a ship arriving once a week. Apart from all the things they bring you, you can have dinner on board and see some new faces for a change!"

"It's pretty dull here," said Signora Pendelli to Adil Bey, pouring him out a second cup of tea.

An unfortunate impulse prompted him to ask:

"Don't Turkish ships ever come here?"

Pendelli shifted in his chair. It wasn't to reach for a sandwich. It was one of those subtle movements which told those who knew him that he was going to say something disagreeable.

"Are there such things?"

He didn't laugh, nor even smile. He just sat there stolidly with his mouth half open and his eyes half shut.

Adil Bey didn't foresee what was coming, but his eyes glittered and a flush had spread over his cheeks.

"What do you mean?"

Signora Pendelli put two lumps of sugar in Adil Bey's cup while her husband blandly went on.

"No need to get cross about it. You must admit the idea of a ship run by Turks. . . ."

"I suppose you think we're savages!"

The quarrel had flared up suddenly. Adil Bey had jumped to his feet. In his anger everything swam before his eyes.

"Oh dear, no! It's ten years since you stopped chopping off people's heads! . . . Come on . . . Sit down . . ."

His wife, still smiling, held out the cup.

"Your tea, Adil Bey."

"Thank you."

"You mustn't mind. My husband's only joking."

"Perhaps he is, but I don't take it as a joke. We're a young republic, I know, and it may be we're a bit uncouth in some ways, but . . ."

"But you want us to treat you as the greatest nation in the world!"

Nobody knew quite how it had started. The Persian consul had returned, creeping noiselessly into the room.

"Look here, Amar . . . Our new friend doesn't understand a joke, and he's absolutely killing when he gets angry. . . . By the way, Adil Bey, do you play bridge?"

"No."

And he added defiantly:

"It's much too subtle a game for a Turk!"

Signora Pendelli made another attempt.

"I assure you my husband . . ."

"Your husband thinks the Italians are the only people who count. And he thinks of Turkey as a place full of harems and eunuchs and scimitars and fezzes."

"How old are you?" asked Mme Amar, smiling.

Still bristling, he answered:

"Thirty-two. I fought for my country in the Dardanelles and then for the Republic in Asia Minor, and I won't allow anyone to tell me . . ."

"Where were you born?" asked Pendelli who had just lit another cigarette.

"In Smyrna."

"I don't call that Turkey. It seems the Greeks have done wonders there. . . ."

Adil Bey nearly choked. He forgot which door he'd come in by and walked straight towards a cupboard. Mme Amar burst out laughing and he looked at her so furiously that she was still more overcome and had to take out her handkerchief to wipe her eyes.

Adil Bey hardly knew what he was doing till he found himself back in the street. He could only dimly remember that Signora Pendelli had followed him out of the room and in the hall had put her hand on his shoulder to say:

"Really! You mustn't take him seriously. He's always teasing people."

He had just sufficient presence of mind to grab his hat. The street was like an oven. For a good quarter of an hour he walked aimlessly, without noticing where he was going, nursing his anger. Then, calming down a little, he tried to recall exactly what had been said.

He found it impossible. His visual recollection was much clearer. With the utmost detail, for instance, he could see the fat, shapeless Pendelli heaped in his easy chair, smoking his absurd ladylike cigarettes. What a man! Positively oozing with self-satisfaction. Admittedly he had a fine house with a terrace and a veranda. There was a grand piano in the drawing-room, which his wife presumably could play. The sandwiches were elegant. Quite European. Made with white bread. . . .

"And he considers the Persians impossible people," muttered Adil Bey to himself.

As a matter of fact he was inclined to agree with him on that subject. He never had liked Persians, and Mme Amar had put his back up by the insolent way in which she had looked him up and down. As for her husband, he really couldn't form an opinion, since he had hardly heard him say a word. He certainly wasn't much to look at. Weedy, commonplace, a little dark moustache, badly cut clothes, and patent leather shoes. . . .

"It must have been on purpose. . . . Obviously he'd intended to insult me from the start. . . ."

It was the day of rest, which in Russia came after five working days. Only as he neared the port was Adil Bey conscious that there were other people strolling along the streets, and little by little, though still angry, he began to take an interest in his surroundings.

It was nothing, however, to the interest the others took in him. Everybody he passed turned round to stare, gazing at him for a long time. What was so extraordinary about him?

The sky grew redder, the shadows bluer. It must have been quite eight o'clock. All at once he realised that all the people in the street were now going in the same direction, and he with them. When he

reached the quays, he found that all the town was there and from the quietness of the streets he was now plunged into a tumult. Somewhere a band was playing. A ship from Odessa had just berthed. What seemed like hundreds of people were disembarking and hundreds more stood watching them land.

The water reflected the purplish tint of the sky, against which masts looked black.

Adil Bey walked through the crowd of men and women, and all who saw him greeted him with the same blatant stare. Some children even followed him to get a better look.

Sometimes, in an effort to get his bearings, he even forgot the Italian consul.

To the left and right of the bay the horizon was shut in by the mountains. In the foreground was the long line of quays seething with humanity. Beyond it, in the bay, seven or eight ships, or it may have been more, seemed stuck to the glassy surface of the calm sea.

As for the town behind the port, it consisted of an endless network of narrow streets. If they were paved at all, it was with uneven cobbles. The houses were dilapidated.

Adil Bey was thirsty. Near the water's edge, he saw a place where refreshments were being served at tables in the open air, and he sat down at one of them and for a while watched a waiter carrying round glasses of beer and lemonade. The customers were paying with paper roubles. Suddenly Adil Bey realised that he hadn't yet changed any money and he got up and went.

Street lamps were lit and the anchor lights of the ships in the bay. Some Italian sailors passed, walking with girls in white sandals. The young man with the bicycle was still pedalling around with a girl on the crossbar, threading his way in and out through the crowd.

It had turned quite cool and a mist was settling at the foot of the mountains.

The music suddenly grew louder, as when, earlier, the funeral had turned into the street, but there was no funeral now.

There was a big new house with lots of windows, all of which

were open as well as the door. Young men and girls were sitting on the window-sills. Inside could be seen paper garlands, pictures of Lenin and Stalin, and placards with political slogans.

It was in front of that house that the band was now playing. In one of the ground-floor rooms, whose walls were covered with diagrams, men in shirt-sleeves were listening to a speech by a comrade, who thumped the table in front of him with his fist.

It wasn't only the band that reminded Adil Bey of the funeral. There was something in common between the attitude of those who had followed the coffin and those who were now sitting in the windows or listening to the speaker, something which he felt sure he would never be able to understand.

What was it? Something more than their clothes, which suggested membership of some society or church guild. Most of them were in white, their shirts or blouses open at the neck. Lots of shaved heads.

Why did they all look so strange, even those in the street who were taking no part in whatever was going on? The latter walked up and down in front of the bronze statue of Lenin, a short, thick-set Lenin with baggy trousers, whose feet rested on a globe of the world.

Short and almost black, he provided a sharp contrast to these tall young men in white who with their girls kept passing and repassing Adil Bey, each time smirking or even laughing at him outright.

"How did it start?" he asked himself for the twentieth time, referring to his quarrel with Pendelli.

Now that he had calmed down he felt sad, depressed, lonely. Fikret was already on his way to Tiflis. In any case Adil Bey hadn't taken to him. He certainly hadn't gone out of his way to make his relief feel at home.

"You'll find everything just as I found it myself when I came here a month ago, after the last chap had died."

"What did he die of?"

Fikret hadn't been keen to discuss the subject.

"The secretary will be here in the morning. She knows the ropes. She's Russian of course."

“Do you mean I must beware of her?”

The other had shrugged his shoulders. No, he certainly hadn't been helpful. He hadn't put him wise about anything. He hadn't even bothered to give Adil Bey the most elementary details about the way he was expected to live here.

The latter suddenly realised he didn't even know how and where he was to get his meals. It's true there was a kitchen at the consulate and he'd seen a woman there. Also a man wandering about the premises. Were they his servants?

To whom could he turn for advice? Not to the Italians anyway! Probably not to the Persians either. No doubt they hung together, in spite of what Pendelli had said.

He went on walking up and down with the crowd between the statue of Lenin and the petrol refinery. Near the fishing port there were a few new houses surrounded by waste land on which a group of men and women were sitting or lying on the ground. They looked quite different to the people he had seen at the funeral or sitting on the window-sills of the big house or even to those of the crowd. They were dirty and dejected. Adil Bey heard a few words of Turkish. They were spoken by the most abject of them all, miserable ragged creatures, squatting in the dust like gypsies.

He had already passed them, but he turned and went up to them.

“Are you Turks?”

They looked at him apathetically. They studied him from head to foot, then slowly turned their heads away.

Yet these people were speaking his own tongue! He must have looked very silly standing there among them, and he felt angry and humiliated.

Six or seven times he had walked the whole length of the quays. The crowd was dispersing. It was a little after ten. In a recess were three or four women. One of them sauntered out towards him, then rejoined the others.

“Signora Pendelli must be more intelligent than her husband,” he reflected.

But what use was that? She couldn't be any help to him. Once

again he looked up at the windows of the big house still full of young men and girls. The band was still playing, and for a few minutes he walked in a cloud of music.

He wondered what his predecessor had died of. He knew nothing about him, not even whether he was an old man.

Twice he took the wrong turning on the way back to the consulate. Everywhere the same cobblestones worn away by ages of rain and slops thrown from the houses. Everywhere dark porches and doors wide open.

At last he came to the house in which he occupied the first floor. The staircase was unlit. He bumped into a couple hugging each other, and hurried on muttering apologies.

He had a key. No sooner was he inside than he realised with a little shock that the place was empty. In the Italian consulate they would be chatting lazily in a comfortable drawing-room, eating sandwiches and sipping vodka, Mme Amar's perfume having invested the room with an aura of femininity.

"Is anybody there?" he shouted out into the darkness, groping for the electric switch.

An unshaded bulb threw a bleak light onto the hall which was furnished as a waiting-room with two benches and official notices on the walls. There was something characteristically dismal about it.

There was no passage in the flat. From the hall you went into what had presumably been intended for a sitting-room, but which was now an office. This room led in turn to a bed-sitting room. A little coffee table attracted his attention—for a moment he couldn't think why. Then he remembered there had been a gramophone on it that morning, with some records. It had disappeared. So had a Turkish rug.

"Is anybody there?" he asked again in a slightly unsteady voice.

No. There was nobody. Neither in the bedroom, nor in the kitchen beyond, where there was a tap over a dirty sink.

For that matter, everything was dirty, the walls, the ceiling, the furniture, and even the papers on his desk, dirty with that peculiarly disheartening dirtiness you find in ill-kept barracks or public offices.

On the shelves of the kitchen cupboard there was nothing to eat. By the sink were some plates that hadn't been washed.

"What right has he to despise the Turks?" he muttered, looking for somewhere to sit down.

He recalled Signora Pendelli's pretty hand as she held the sugar tongs poised over his cup. She was an attractive woman—there was no doubt about that. Her blue silk dress showed off the lines of her rather full figure. Her lips were full too and, when they parted, disclosed very white teeth. But more than anything she had the easy grace of a woman of the world.

"Not like that dusky little Persian woman!"

A brazen little minx, hard as nails, who made no bones about grabbing any man who came within reach.

The bed wasn't made and Adil Bey didn't know where to find some sheets. He had had no time to inspect the place, and he hadn't even started to unpack his trunks. He drank some water from the kitchen tap. It had a nasty medicinal taste.

He could hear people walking about on the floor above. Looking out into the dark street he could just make out two people leaning out of the window opposite. They didn't say anything. They were just taking the air, or perhaps watching him.

For his windows had no curtains. Had there been any when he arrived that day? He couldn't remember. He looked round for a suitable place to settle down, and was still undecided when all the lights went out.

Going to the window, he saw that everyone else's lights had gone out too. The people opposite were still leaning out of their window, and as his eyes got used to the darkness he could see it was a man and a woman.

The lights didn't go on again. It wasn't a breakdown. The supply was cut off every day at midnight. There were steps in a street nearby, and somewhere a dog barked.

Would the Pendelli's electricity have been cut off too? At any rate they'd have lamps all ready, so it wouldn't matter. Adil Bey, being a non-smoker, didn't even have any matches.

Miserably he looked around him. There was just enough light reflected by the clouds to enable him little by little to see his way about.

There was nothing for it now but to sleep. He lay down in his clothes on the bed, getting up again with a start when a moonbeam shone on his face. Had he already dozed off? He didn't know. Running over to the window the first thing he saw opposite was the glow of a cigarette, then a rolled-up shirt-sleeve, a forearm resting on the window-sill, a man's head, and lastly the woman by his side who had let her hair down over her shoulders.

The moonlight filtered into their room, and behind them Adil Bey could just make out a white rectangle which must be their bed.

"They must be able to see me too," he mused. "They can't help it."

II

Adil Bey woke up sweating, bathed in dazzling sunshine. Before getting up, before even raising his head, he began by looking at the window opposite which was in the shade.

At once, he was annoyed, and his first act was to smooth his tousled hair. The window on the other side of the street was wide open. A woman was doing the room, and the way in which she glanced at Adil Bey made it clear that it wasn't the first time that morning that she had noticed him.

Anyhow, she couldn't see him in the kitchen. He went there. He rinsed his face, and, having nothing else handy, dried it with his handkerchief. He drank a mouthful of water. Straightening his tie, he went back to the window, gloomy and mistrustful. He felt washed out, and he had a rotten taste in his mouth as though he had a hangover.

The woman was making the bed. There were two pillows, and Adil Bey noticed that there was another bed, a single one, against the wall on the right.

Once again she glanced in his direction, but when their eyes met she looked quickly away. She was young and buxom, and her features were characteristically Georgian. She wasn't in a dressing-gown. Perhaps she hadn't got one. But Adil Bey could have sworn that the dress she was wearing had been slipped on directly over her skin. It was of stockinet in artificial silk and bright yellow in colour. So closely did it mould her figure that Adil Bey received as it were a sudden gust of intimacy.

The people over the way had obviously only that one room to live in. He could see some shelves with books, some cups and plates on a table, and a spirit lamp on which something was cooking. Along one wall, clothes were hanging, and Adil Bey's eye came to rest on a green disc which thenceforward became the focal point of his attention. It was the green cap of a member of the *Ogpu*.

So fascinated was he by the cap that it was some time before he became aware of a vague murmur of voices in the street below. Finally, looking down, he saw that a queue of at least two hundred people had formed up on the narrow pavement. Some were standing, others squatting on the ground. The head of the queue was in front of a door in the house immediately opposite. He hadn't noticed there was a shop there. It must be one of those co-operatives he had heard about. Some words were written in chalk on the windows, but of course he couldn't read them.

He raised his eyes again to the floor above. The woman in the yellow dress shut her window and then began doing her hair.

Why was he so tired? Without any particular object in view he opened the door of his office. What he saw brought him to an abrupt halt. He was quite taken aback. There were at least twenty people there, on the chairs, on the settee, and some on the sill of the open window. In the waiting-room beyond were others, probably as many again if not more. They looked at him quietly without saying a word. The only one to make any move was a peasant

dressed in the costume of the mountains who opened his passport and laid it on the desk.

Then a fair girl in a black dress got up from where she had been sitting at a small table. She made a slight movement of her head which could have been taken for a greeting or a sign of deference.

He couldn't go on standing there with twenty pairs of eyes fixed on him. Mustering what dignity he could he went forward rather stiffly and sat down in the cane-seated armchair at the desk. The peasant from the mountains pushed his passport towards him.

What was so disconcerting was the absolute silence. It wasn't out of respect, because some were smoking, and those who were moved to do so didn't hesitate to spit on the floor. How long had they been waiting there? And what could they all be wanting?

"Mademoiselle? . . ." asked Adil Bey, turning to the fair girl in black who had come up to the desk too.

"Sonia," she answered.

"I suppose you're my secretary? . . ."

He spoke in French.

"I'm the secretary to the consulate, yes."

"Can you speak Turkish?"

"A little."

She was very young indeed, but not in the least intimidated by him. She had her fountain-pen in her hand, and she looked at the passport as though she was all ready to start work.

Adil Bey looked at the passport too, but as it was all in Russian it didn't mean a great deal to him. All the same he made a pretence of studying it. He took his time, shooting sidelong glances at the scene around him. Leaving him to it, the secretary went back to her little table.

He noticed that there was a telephone on his desk. Also that the people waiting there were all poor and ill clad. Right in front of him, a woman was suckling her baby, and the old man beside her with an astrakhan cap was barefoot.

"Mademoiselle Sonia . . ."

She merely raised her head.

"Would you come this way a moment?"

He led the way into the next room. The window opposite was still shut. The girl looked at the bed, which showed signs of having been slept on.

"Mademoiselle Sonia, I don't think I've time to deal with these people to-day. Have they been waiting long?"

"Some of them were queueing up outside at six o'clock this morning. It's ten now."

"All the same, would you mind telling them. . . ."

"Shall we be open to-morrow?"

"To-morrow, yes, to-morrow," he agreed with alacrity.

This Sonia looked barely eighteen. She was a slender girl, with a small pale face, light blue eyes and flaxen hair, yet there was a calm forcefulness about her which he found disconcerting. She didn't shut the door behind her, and he watched her send the people away.

She stood very erect in the middle of the room, still holding her fountain-pen in her hand. She spoke quietly in Russian with an occasional gesture to reinforce her words. She spoke in a way that brooked no contradiction, and there were no protests. Only the woman with the baby sat on placidly, until Sonia went up to her, removed the baby from her breast and herself rearranged her clothing.

The sound of many feet reminded Adil Bey of a flock of sheep. The last to go lingered in the doorway, looking back, hoping he might relent at the last moment. When at last the door was closed, there still remained an odour of poverty and dirt.

Having seen them out, Sonia came back into the office to find Adil Bey sitting dejectedly in his chair with his elbows on the desk.

"Have you had your tea?" she asked.

"What tea?" he answered.

And, suddenly flaring up:

"Where is there any tea in this place? Where are the servants? Where's the gramophone gone to? Where . . . ?"

It was silly of course to start telling about the gramophone, but he couldn't help regarding its disappearance as a personal affront.

"It's true, the servants have left."

"Why?"

"Because Monsieur Fikret sent them away."

"He sent them away? Why? And what right had he to do it?"

Sonia didn't smile. She answered gravely, thoughtfully:

"He must have had some reason. Perhaps you could find someone else to look after you."

"Perhaps? What do you mean by that? That I might have to fend for myself?"

"No. I think I might find somebody."

"And meanwhile?"

"It's difficult. You might have your meals in a co-op restaurant, but . . ."

He hung on her words as though she were his one hope of salvation.

"Have you got any *valuta*?" she asked.

"What's that?"

"*Valuta*. That's foreign currency. If you have I can go and buy you anything you like at the *Torgsin*. That's a shop for foreigners where you can pay in foreign money. There's one in every town. They've got everything there, just as you have abroad.

He had already taken out his wallet, but at the sight of his Turkish pounds the girl frowned.

"I don't know whether they'll accept those. I'll try, if you like."

"What do you mean? They . . ."

But he stopped himself. He mustn't get involved in another scene like the one in the Italian consulate, though it made him go hot all over to think that Turkish money might be refused where other currencies were accepted.

"What would you like me to buy?"

"Anything you like. I'm not hungry."

It was quite true. He wasn't hungry at all. He didn't want anything. At least, he wanted to know why Fikret had gone off with the gramophone and dismissed the servants, why the Persian consul had gone with him to the station, why Pendelli had gone out of his

way to insult him, why the people opposite had stared out of their window till two in the morning, and why . . .

Why everything! Including those Turkish pounds that they threatened to treat as worthless paper!

"I'll be back in an hour," said Sonia, putting on a little black hat and slipping the Turkish notes into her handbag.

He didn't even answer her. The next moment he went up to the window just in time to see a woman in a white overall come out of the shop and hang up a notice on the door. He couldn't read it. The people waiting could, but they went on standing there for a minute or two wondering whether it was true, rather like the people Adil Bey had sent away just now. Then they slouched slowly off.

What could it be? That there was no more bread? Or no more potatoes? In spite of the notice, Sonia went into the shop. At the same time the window above opened. The young woman was properly dressed now. She had on the same yellow dress as before, but this time with underclothes. Her hair was done and her face made up. For a moment she stood by the window polishing her nails, then she swung round towards the door. Adil Bey couldn't see who had come into the room. Obviously someone had, for she was speaking. He could see her lips moving. Then for a second the newcomer came into view. It was Sonia.

He had only a glimpse of her, but was quite sure. A minute later she emerged from the shop below and hurried along the street.

What else was there for Adil Bey to do? He started unpacking, looking about for suitable places for his clothes and all the other things he had brought with him. If he was thoroughly disgruntled about everything, it was nevertheless the Italian consul who was the focal point of his resentment. He couldn't imagine him otherwise than leaning back in a well-upholstered easy chair, the symbol of comfort and well-being, hardly moving except now and again when a slight tremor would go through him as a prelude to his making some spiteful remark.

As for Mme Amar, she was probably just as bad.

No sooner had he thought of her than he heard steps in the office. Carrying a pile of shirts, he went to see who it was.

She it was, smiling like a person who is springing a very pleasant surprise on someone. She came towards him effusively, holding out her hand, saying familiarly:

"Hallo, Adil Bey! . . ."

He put his shirts down on a chair, and advanced gravely to meet her.

"You know, you're a marvellous man, Adil Bey. You're the first person to stand up to those people, and you put them in their place properly."

"Sit down, won't you?"

He was too taken aback by her apparition to find anything else to say. She didn't sit down, but wandered about the room as though she was too strung up to keep still.

"And she's even worse than he is with her grand airs. Thinks she's a great lady! And her daughter! You haven't seen her yet. She's only ten, but she's already exactly like her mother."

She was suddenly struck by the emptiness of the place.

"What? Have you shut the consulate? As a matter of fact you might as well shut it every day for all the good it does. That's what I'm always telling my husband. You take endless trouble to get someone a visa, and then at the last minute, when you think it's in the bag, they tell you it has to be countersigned by someone in Moscow and you have to start all over again."

Her eyes fell on the window opposite, and she exclaimed:

"Hallo! There's Nadia all dolled up!"

"Do you know her?"

"She's the wife of the chief of the harbour police. Yes, I know her all right. She's almost a fellow countrywoman of mine. Comes from just across the frontier and her mother was Persian. I met her soon after we came here and asked her to come to tea. She said she would. Later she telephoned to put it off. She did that three times altogether, and now when we meet in the street she gives me a little nod and hurries past. You understand?"

"No."

"Of course not. You're new. But you'll soon find out. We're foreigners. It doesn't do people any good to be seen about with us."

She couldn't keep still. She was certainly a nervy creature. Everything she said was accompanied by smiles, pouts, frowns, or other grimaces.

"It comes to this—that we're the only people left for you to talk to. Now that you've slammed the door on the Italians. You don't regret that, do you?"

"Not in the least."

Only he was rather alarmed by her. She took up too much room. She made too much noise. Besides, he didn't like the insistent way she had of looking at him.

"Do you know why I called round this morning?"

"No."

"Really, you're an absolute lamb! I came round to help you get straight. Since you're a bachelor you wouldn't know how to go about it. Look at those shirts on that chair!"

She picked them up and marched into the bedroom.

"Of course this isn't like the Pendelli's place! They've got two bathrooms. They might as well have three while they're about it!"

She took off her hat. She had a sleeveless dress and as she hung up her clothes she displayed her armpits.

"If you take my advice, the first thing you'll do is to get some curtains. Particularly with those people opposite!"

Adil Bey looked across the street. The young woman was still doing her nails. When Mme Amar waved to her, her only response was a slight movement of the head.

And a few seconds later, when Adil Bey looked again, the window was shut.

"You've got some lovely shirts. Do they come from Istanbul?"

"I bought them in Vienna."

Someone had come in. Adil Bey went to the door to find Sonia laden with parcels.

"I've got some methylated spirit too," she said.

Then suddenly she got a whiff of the Persian woman's scent, and looked round with a frown. Adil Bey reddened.

Sonia had to go through the bedroom to reach the kitchen which was right at the end of the flat. She saw Mme Amar bending over a trunk. A little later there was a clatter of plates.

"You seem to have got to know each other pretty quickly!"

"The servants have left, and she offered to . . ."

Mme Amar took him by the sleeve and led him into the office, closing the door behind them.

"Do you know who she is?" she whispered.

And pointing to the house opposite:

"She's Koline's sister. As I was telling you just now Koline's the head of the harbour police. Did it ever occur to you to wonder what your predecessor died of?"

"What was it?"

"Nobody knows. All we know is that he died in a few hours. A man who'd never been ill in his life!"

Adil Bey must have turned pale, for she laughed. Putting both hands on his shoulders, she went on:

"You'll get used to it. You'll see. Only, you've got to watch your step. Above all you've got to be careful about what you say."

A bell rang. It was the first time he'd heard the telephone ring and he didn't recognise it at once. The door opened and Sonia came in, making straight for the desk.

"Take it yourself," said Mme Amar to the consul.

He picked up the receiver and tried in vain to understand what was being said, while the two women stood by his side.

"They're speaking Russian," he sighed, holding out the receiver.

Mme Amar got there first. Snatching the receiver, she said a few words in Russian. Sonia stood back.

"It's from Tiflis. They're putting you through to the Turkish consulate. Here you are. Here's someone speaking Turkish."

Adil Bey seized the phone, almost childishly delighted at the prospect of hearing his own tongue.

"Hallo! . . . Tiflis? . . . Is that Fikret?"

He couldn't hear well. The voice was faint and there was a lot of crackling on the line. Finally he heard:

"We thought we ought to let you know that Fikret Effendi was arrested on his arrival here . . ."

"What's that? . . . Hallo! . . . I'd like to know . . ."

It was no use. They'd rung off and it was once again a Russian voice that answered him.

Adil Bey looked from one of the women to the other. Sonia looked back at him impassively like a secretary awaiting orders. The Persian gave him a different look altogether, one which said plainly:

"Don't forget what I told you. Send her away first."

"You can go," sighed Adil Bey. "It was nothing important."

"I'm cooking you some eggs. Is that all right?"

"Yes. Thank you."

He waited till she was back in the kitchen, then shut the door again.

"I can't make it out at all. They tell me from Tiflis that Fikret's been arrested."

Mme Amar ground her teeth.

"I was just asking them for details when they rang off. What do you think it means?"

If he was upset, she was much more so. She picked up the telephone, but, when asked what number she wanted, she changed her mind and put it down again.

"Perhaps I ought to do something," said Adil Bey. "Do you think if I approached the authorities officially . . . ?"

"There's nothing to be done," she answered curtly.

She took no further notice of him. She was plunged deep in thought, her features set, and like that she was almost ugly.

"Did they say whether they'd seized his luggage?"

"They didn't mention it. They gave no details at all."

"Of course not!"

"Why?"

"Never mind. . . . At least . . . The thing is he was taking some things for us. Three magnificent silver samovars."

Adil Bey couldn't make head or tail of it. He stared at her so blandly that she lost patience.

"Yes. I said three samovars! . . . It's no use looking at me like that! . . . There are still a few knocking about—or I should say hidden away. It's the peasants that have them. And they're ready to sell them for a crust of bread. And that's hardly an exaggeration, since we pay in flour. . . . And that fool of a Fikret said he could easily get them across the Persian frontier for us. . . . I must let my husband know at once."

She looked round for her hat, then remembered she'd left it in the bedroom. There, she noticed the half unpacked trunks and her manner changed immediately. She seemed to throw off her worries. She took both Adil Bey's hands and held them for a moment.

"You're not angry with me, are you?"

"Why should I be?"

"For running away like this . . . I'm sure we're going to be friends, great friends. . . ."

She was still holding his hands, and she pressed them more tightly as she asked:

"Do you want us to be?"

He said yes, as he couldn't very well say anything else, and the next moment her lips had lightly touched his.

• "Hush! . . . No, don't come with me. I'll see myself out. . . ."

He had rather a hang-dog look as he went into the kitchen to be greeted by the spluttering of eggs in the frying-pan. With her hat on and her bag in her hand, Sonia was all ready to go.

"I think you'll find everything you want, though there are no tablecloths or napkins. For that matter, there's no linen at all, not even sheets."

"Were they there before?"

"Certainly."

"Whose were they?"

"I don't know. But you can buy what you need at the *Torgsin*. I'm going to dinner now. What time do you want me back?"

How should he know?

"What time do you usually come back?"

"At three."

He didn't look straight at her, but stole glances out of the corner of his eye.

"How old are you?"

"Twenty."

"Do you come from this part of Russia?"

"From Moscow."

"Where did you learn Turkish?"

With the same simplicity she answered:

"Before the revolution, my father was hall porter in the Turkish embassy. . . . But your eggs will be burnt if you don't look out. I'll be going now."

His meal reminded him of wartime, but it was without the atmosphere of war. He sat alone at a little deal table and ate his eggs in the frying-pan. Afterwards he opened a tin of tunny fish which he washed down with a bottle of beer.

He wasn't really hungry. He ate just for the sake of eating. And, as he had to look at something, he gazed at the window over the way, which remained obdurately closed. Now and again he thought he could see someone pass, but he couldn't see whether it was the man or the woman.

The street was deserted. It was hot and Adil Bey was sleepy. Should he try to have a nap? What else was there for him to do. He could go on unpacking of course, or clear the table and wash up, but he didn't want to do anything like that, and he went on sitting for a long time with his elbows on the table and his head in his hands.

III

Adil Bey and Sonia threaded their way past the dozens of people squatting on the stairs, then through rooms full of a compact mass

of anonymous humanity, and finally along a corridor at the end of which they went through a door.

It was the third time they had come to the department which dealt with aliens. As on the two previous occasions, the consul carried a black brief-case which at the last moment he handed to his secretary.

Now, on the third visit, it was already a matter of routine. He first shook hands with the man with the shaven head and open-necked Russian shirt who sat at a table piled with papers, then bowed in the direction of a woman who sat at a table nearby.

The room was full of sunshine and very hot. Deal shelves ran round the whitewashed walls. Sonia, sitting at the end of the table, opened the black brief-case.

There was a friendly feeling about the place. Adil Bey sat on a rush-seated chair near the open window.

"Ask him first of all about the Armenian whose papers I gave him the first time we came."

The head of the department couldn't speak either Turkish or French. His shaven head and his shirt like Tolstoy's gave him an ascetic appearance, which was enhanced by his kindly smile and the calm gentleness of his blue eyes.

When Adil Bey spoke, the man looked at him with an encouraging smile, though he couldn't understand a word.

Sonia repeated the question in Russian. The man, who had invariably a glass of tea in front of him, first drank a mouthful then pronounced a few words.

"They're waiting for instructions from Moscow," translated Sonia.

"They could have reached here a fortnight ago by telegram."

Without answering him, Sonia indicated that she couldn't do anything about it and that the only thing was to wait.

"And the woman whose furniture was confiscated?"

Whenever he spoke in Turkish, the official either looked at Adil Bey or studied the papers which Sonia put in front of him, and his face expressed infinite patience and inexhaustible goodwill.

"It would be better to deal with the fresh cases," said Sonia.

"All right. Then ask him why they arrested that wretched man as he left my office yesterday."

Adil Bey watched her more closely than usual, as though he could guess from her manner whether or not she was really translating what he said.

"What does he say?"

"That he hasn't heard about it."

"Somebody must know about it. He's only got to ask."

Adil Bey was getting angry. Morning after morning, as he sat at his desk listening to some endless and monotonous complaint, with Sonia beside him taking notes, he had all the time been scrutinising the people sitting in his room.

They were the same people he had seen near the port, that ragged miserable swarm, writhing in the dirt. They were the same sort you could see huddled on the deck in the steamer to Odessa with their few possessions tied up in bundles which served as pillows, or camping for days and nights on station platforms waiting for a train.

"Kulaks," said Sonia coldly.

Disinherited peasants. They came from all over the place, some from as far afield as Turkestan. Somebody had told them they could find work and bread in Batum. They wandered hopelessly about the streets till one day another Kulak told them the Turkish consul could help them.

"Are you a Turkish subject?"

"I don't know."

Many of them had been, before the war, and they had become Russians unbeknown to themselves.

"What do you want me to do for you?"

"I don't know. They won't give us any work here. We can't get any bread."

"Do you want to go back to Turkey?"

"Is there anything to eat there?"

Some of them had lost a child or two on the way and wanted the
w.o.w.

consul to make inquiries for them. Or perhaps at some railway station they'd been stripped of all their belongings and even clapped in gaol.

They wouldn't know why, and didn't even ask him to find out. All they wanted were their possessions and with gentle obstinacy they would ask him over and over again to get them back.

If they really were Turkish subjects, Adil Bey could at least take up their case. Sonia would take down the particulars, and together they would go to the aliens office where they were always received by the same smiling man with the embroidered shirt.

"What does he say?"

The man had answered, gravely studying his dirty nails.

Two days before a couple of kulaks had left the consulate and two or three minutes later the woman had rushed back in a great state, explaining that at the corner of the street some men in green caps had pounced on her husband and taken him off, driving her off with blows when she tried to follow.

"He says he'll try to give you an answer the next time you come."

"But the woman hasn't got so much as a rouble. Her husband had all their money on him when he was arrested."

"How had they got that money?"

"It wasn't very much. Now she has nothing."

"She must get work."

"Nobody wants to give her any. She has to sleep huddled in a doorway."

The official made a vague gesture and said a few words.

"What does he say?"

"That it's not a case for his department, that he'll pass it on," said Sonia dispassionately.

"He could ring up the police."

The telephone was within reach of his hand.

"It's not working," she explained.

Adil Bey felt like getting up and stumping out of the room. Everything about that office seemed stagnant. He felt crushed

by this dead weight of officialdom. And it was obviously quite deliberate.

It had been going on for three weeks now. He had brought particulars of at least fifty cases, and he might just as well have thrown them into the fire. Everything he said was listened to with the utmost courtesy and the following week he'd be given the answer.

"We're waiting for instructions from Moscow."

Someone came into the office, and the official, leaning back in his chair, embarked on a long, slow conversation with him. Sonia waited. She never showed the least sign of impatience. She was always exactly the same, whether here or at the consulate, with her black dress and little hat, her fair hair, her well-behaved manner.

The woman at the other table was doing accounts with the aid of an abacus, she too stopping from time to time to drink from her glass of tea.

The visitor went and Sonia delved into the brief-case, handing over the papers one by one, with a few words for each.

"Don't forget to tell him that that one's urgent," sighed Adil Bey hopelessly.

"I've told him so. He says it will go through quickly."

"Has he found me a servant yet?" For Adil Bey was still without one.

"What does he say?"

"That he's still looking for one."

"There are plenty of people without work, to judge from the number of beggars about."

"There are people who won't work."

"Not even when they're offered good wages? I'm quite prepared to pay well."

"I'm sure he's told them that."

"All the same, translate what I say."

She did so, reluctantly. The man shrugged his shoulders helplessly.

"It's preposterous! In a town with a population of thirty thousand not to be able to find a single person to do my housework!"

"He'll find you someone. It's just a matter of time."

"Then ask him why the gramophone I ordered from Istanbul came through with the records missing."

The official seemed to understand the word gramophone, for he answered at once in a few words.

"What's he say?"

"That they had to be sent to Moscow, because some of them were Spanish records."

"What's that got to do with it?"

"No one knows Spanish in the office here."

With a savage look on his face, Adil Bey got to his feet. It cost him an effort to shake the man's hand.

"Come on," he said to Sonia.

In the corridors you had to step over sleeping figures, lumps of humanity, bundles of rags, that didn't even make a sound when you kicked them by accident.

In the street they walked side by side. By rights Adil Bey should have been carrying the brief-case, but he forgot to take it from her. It was the worst part of the day. There wasn't a breath of wind coming from the sea, nothing to disturb the heavy pool of heat that settled between the mountains on either flank.

A smart car stood in front of the Italian consulate. It was the consul's. Since there were only three cars in the whole town it naturally attracted a good deal of attention. On the first floor veranda, Signora Pendelli, in her morning negligé, was acting as governess to her daughter. On a wicker table were some exercise books, an inkpot and misty glasses of iced lemonade.

"Do you think the Italians get more satisfaction from the authorities than I do?" asked Adil Bey gloomily.

"There's no reason why they should."

It was always the same: perfectly logical answers which gave absolutely nothing away!

There were few people about, practically no shops, and none of that traffic which makes a town look like a town.

In former years those little streets must have swarmed with life

like those in Istanbul, Samsun, or Trebizond, or for that matter in any oriental town. One could still see what had once been shops, but they were empty now, their shutters closed or their windows broken. There were signs, not yet completely effaced, not only in Russian but in Armenian, Turkish, Georgian, and Yiddish.

Where was now the roast mutton sizzling on a spit at the very doors of restaurants? Where were the smiths' anvils or the counters of the money-changers?

And all those people in their national costumes who must have gone through the streets peddling their wares?

The few people visible now crouched in doorways or walked slowly through the baking streets with an air of resignation.

Batum was now no more than a port at the end of the pipe-line that brought the Baku oil across the Caucasus. Beyond that what was there? A bronze statue of Lenin which, being only natural size made him look small. A big house facing the quays which was the centre of all the clubs and trade unions.

Sonia walked without saying a word and without looking about her. And she stood waiting patiently, when Adil Bey stopped to look at a woman sitting on the curb, rummaging in a dustbin and eating anything she could find. She had swollen legs and huge flabby white cheeks.

"Can't they give her anything to eat?" he asked irritably.

"Everybody who works gets enough food to keep them healthy. . . ."

"Then how can you explain . . . ?"

"And there's work for everybody," she went on blandly.

"Suppose she can't work. What then?"

"There are special infirmaries."

She recited these remarks in an expressionless voice. No matter what Adil Bey asked, there was always a ready-made answer, but these answers were so utterly unreal that they made him feel he was drifting in a world devoid of substance.

"What would you like for dinner, Adil Bey?"

They had almost reached the consulate. Since he had no maid,

Sonia was still looking after him, at any rate to the extent of buying his food and preparing his midday meal.

"You can get anything you like. And will you ask the doctor to come and see me."

"Are you ill?"

It gave him a certain satisfaction to answer her in her own style:

"If I ask for the doctor, the chances are I'm not very well!"

With that he went into the house. Perhaps he wasn't really ill, yet he certainly didn't feel well. Possibly his flat had something to do with it. Every time he opened the door of the waiting-room it nearly turned him up. The office was nearly as bad. Both rooms fairly stank. Twice he had got up early and scrubbed the floor with his own hands. A third time, when he'd taken his pail to the tap on the landing, the other tenants had stopped him, saying something in Russian.

For there were always people gathered round the tap. The tenants seemed to prefer washing on the landing rather than in their rooms. Perhaps there were too many people in the rooms. Certainly there were an incredible number of people in the house, and Adil Bey felt sure many of them must be living ten in a room.

He went into his bedroom, and as usual looked at the window over the way. It was open. Koline must have just got home. He had thrown his green cap down on the bed and was now sitting opposite his wife at the table on which were some slices of black bread, potatoes, tea, and sugar.

"I hope it'll be the same doctor," mused Adil Bey.

He wanted it to be the one who had attended his predecessor. He hadn't any appetite these days and the tinned food which he gulped down all alone in his kitchen gave him heartburn.

If Sonia saw to his food, she never did the washing up or made his bed. Here she was, back from her shopping already. She could hardly fail to see her brother and sister-in-law sitting at their bread and potatoes. She opened a tin of cray-fish, put some soused herrings on a plate and some cheese on another.

Did it trouble her to see all this good food? Did she envy Adil

Bey? And to think it was all for someone who wasn't even hungry! He watched her going to and fro. He had sometimes wondered whether she wasn't tempted to go to his cupboard when his back was turned. He wouldn't have minded if she had. But she didn't. She preferred to let things go bad rather than help herself. And things did go bad and had to be thrown away, no doubt to be rescued in due course from the dustbin by someone like the woman he'd seen that day.

"Is the doctor coming?"

"He'll be here in a few minutes."

What did she think of him? Sometimes he caught her looking at him, but it was only with the same impassive look she turned on everything.

"You can go off to dinner now."

He knew he would see her go into the room over the way, take off her hat and sit down between the other two with her back to the window. That was her place.

Did she talk about him there? Did she tell them what they'd done that morning and all the things he'd said? To judge by the other two, conversation at meals was never very animated. They ate slowly, mouthful by mouthful. Koline put a lump of sugar in his mouth before drinking his scalding tea. When he'd finished he always leant over the window-sill for a quarter of an hour, his shirt-sleeves making two brilliant splashes of white in the sunshine, which by one o'clock had spread to their side of the street.

Had he other recreations? Sometimes he would go out in the evening, taking his wife, who always wore the same yellow dress, just as Sonia wore the same black one. At midnight, however, they were always at the window taking the air, saying nothing. They went to bed in the dark.

That might have been because of the girl, who went to bed earlier. She undressed in the dark too. In the morning, when the window was opened, she was already fully dressed with her hat on, and her bed was made. Her sister-in-law, Nadia, didn't have to go out, so she could mooch around in her slippers doing the house-

work. Sometimes she even went back to bed for a bit and read a book.

"Come in!"

It was the doctor. He put his things down on the table together with his cap and turned to Adil Bey inquiringly.

"Do you speak French?"

"A little."

"I'm not feeling well. I've no appetite and sometimes I feel sick. I'm not sleeping well either."

He spoke in a rather surly tone, as though he held the doctor responsible for his condition.

"Take your clothes off."

It was a fiasco right from the start. Adil Bey had hoped for a friendly chat. He had wanted to be reassured about himself and also to gather some useful information. And here they were, already on the verge of hostilities!

Because of the window opposite he retired to the far end of the room and took off his jacket.

"Your shirt too."

The doctor looked callously at the livid flesh, already a little too fat, at the sloping shoulders.

"Have you been ill before?"

"Never. Not since I was a child."

"Take a deep breath . . . Cough . . . Breathe again . . ."

Adil Bey could still see Sonia's back, her brother's profile and the heavy dark hair of the Georgian woman.

"Sit down."

To test his knee-jerk. After that, the doctor took his blood-pressure and Adil Bey could feel his arm swell under the tourniquet.

"What did my predecessor die of?" he asked in as natural a voice as he could assume.

"I can't remember. I'd have to refer to my case-book."

And the doctor looked at him, considering what part of him to examine next.

"Lie down."

He felt his liver and his spleen. That was all. He put his instruments back in his bag.

"Well?"

"You're a bit nervy and depressed. Better take some bromide when you go to bed."

"Where do I get it?"

"You can write to Moscow for it. . . . Keep to a light diet."

"But where is the trouble?"

"There isn't much wrong and it's nowhere in particular."

He walked out, taking no notice of Adil Bey, who followed him to the front door bare-chested, his braces hanging over his haunches.

"You really think it's something serious, don't you?"

"No. But of course one can never be sure. As for the bromide, since you're a foreigner it might be quicker for you to get it sent from home. Drugs are rare in this country."

Adil Bey wanted to ask him whether his heart was sound. It was too late, however. The doctor was already on the landing. The telephone bell started ringing and, glancing across the street, he thought he could see a tremor go down Sonia's back.

"Hallo! . . . Yes. It's me. . . ."

It was Mme Amar, who rang him up almost every day, but whom he had only met once since her visit. He had run into her on the beach, on her way to the ladies' bathing enclosure.

Before coming to Russia he had heard that people bathed naked, and he had imagined a riot of bronzed flesh basking in the sun or splashing in the waves.

Instead of that, on the vast stony beach were two enclosures surrounded by barbed wire which made them look rather like concentration camps. One for each sex, of course. It cost twenty-five kopecks to go in.

"What are you doing, prowling round here?" Nejla Amar had asked in her rich voice.

Which was very much to the point, since that was exactly what he was doing! Now, over the telephone, she simpered:

"I've some good news for you. Guess what. . . ."

"I've no idea."

"I said *guess* . . ."

"My government has ordered me back to Ankara?"

"Brute! . . . Amar left this morning for Teheran and won't be back for ten days."

"Ah!"

"Is that all you've got to say about it?"

"I didn't know. . . ."

He still had no shirt on.

"Oh, well! If that's what you feel about it, I won't come to tea with you after all. That's what I'd thought of doing."

"Do."

"Really? You mean it? I'm not sure you do. . . . Besides I might find you with your guardian angel."

"I promise. . . ."

"You promise to send her away? In that case, perhaps I will. . . ."

A disagreeable noise came over the line. It must have been a kiss. Koline was at the window opposite and the smoke of his cigarette rose in a straight line through the still air.

At eleven o'clock that night the chief of the harbour police opened his window once again. He had just got back from his club. Opposite him, Adil Bey was leaning out of his bedroom window.

For a moment Koline disappeared again into the darkness of the room to take off his boots and put on his slippers, also to fetch a packet of cigarettes from his jacket pocket.

Adil Bey didn't move. He was enveloped in darkness, and he could feel the cool stone of the window-sill against his forearms.

Nobody was in the street below, but in the silence he could hear a footfall, though it must have been two or three streets away. There was a light northerly breeze blowing now, and he even caught an occasional hint of music coming from a bar on the quays which existed to provide amusement for foreign sailors.

Koline struck a match and Adil Bey watched the flickering of

the flame as he lit his cigarette. A little later, Nadia joined her husband and for a few moments there was a faint murmur of their voices.

Was Sonia sleeping? He couldn't see her little iron bedstead, but he knew exactly where it stood, against the wall on the right.

The air was soft and sweet, no doubt from having brushed the sub-tropical vegetation of the mountains. The Georgian woman snuggled up to Koline, her body soft too and warm from the bed where she had been lying waiting for him.

There was a sound in the room behind Adil Bey. He looked round. It was Nejla Amar who, with a sigh, had thrown the bed-clothes off her shoulders and turned over.

The bedroom was so full of her scent that he couldn't help wondering whether whiffs of it couldn't reach the people opposite. It was a strong heady perfume that Nejla had no doubt chosen to cover her own rather animal smell.

"Come to bed," she sighed, half asleep.

Could they hear her on the other side of the street? They were quite close, as the street wasn't wide. Koline had put an arm round his wife's shoulders.

Adil Bey didn't want to sleep nor even to lie in bed beside Nejla's burning hot body. As a matter of fact he wasn't really thinking about her at all. He was wondering whether Sonia was asleep and whether her face had the same cold impassiveness as when she was awake. Had she guessed the truth when Adil Bey had sent her away at four o'clock telling her to take the rest of the afternoon off? A little later he had seen her going off towards the beach with a towel over her arm. And she had crossed Mme Amar at the corner of the street.

"Adil! Do come . . ."

"Hush!"

He didn't want to shut the window, as it soon became suffocatingly hot inside. Since the doctor had taken his blood pressure he had been conscious of a pounding in his arteries, and it frightened him.

He really had felt ill and had told Nejla so on her arrival, and for quite five minutes she had fussed over him and petted him.

If only she had agreed to go home! Wasn't her servant quite capable of telling her husband everything on his return?

"Is he jealous?"

"Like a tiger!" she had answered gaily.

She laughed all the time. A shallow, nervous laugh which made it difficult to tell whether it sprang from mirth or exasperation. Perhaps it was merely provocative.

Why had she stayed? For that matter why had she come at all? Twice she had switched the light on, and Adil Bey had had quite a fight to switch it off. Yes, a real struggle. He'd had to twist her wrist.

"You're afraid of your little spy opposite, aren't you?" she had sneered. "You're a nasty bit of work, but I love you all the same!"

And now Adil Bey, who hated tobacco like poison, was almost tempted to smoke himself. He gazed at the glowing end of Koline's cigarette, and it seemed to him a symbol of peace, of voluptuous relaxation. They were going to have a thunderstorm before the night was out, there was no doubt about that. And the threat of it gave an added charm to his reverie at the window.

He could no longer hear Nejla's regular breathing. He didn't think about her. He didn't really think of anything. It was perfect bliss. He just surrendered himself to the night until even his eyes no longer saw anything.

And suddenly he felt something round his neck and pressing all down his side.

He started and blinked several times before coming to himself. It was Nejla who had snuggled up to him like Nadia to Koline. She had a cigarette between her lips and she whispered:

"Give me a light."

He had no matches on him. He didn't even know whether he wanted to give her a light. The people opposite hadn't budged. Their eyes weren't visible but they must have been looking straight in front of them. They might well be able to see the half-naked Nejla though, as she was as brown as a berry, perhaps they wouldn't.

"Give me a light."

He found some matches on the table. A little flame flickered like the one he had watched a little while ago. They both leant over the window-sill like the other couple.

The time passed. There were no steps in the street now, no music drifting intermittently from the bar by the quays.

They had been there for a whole hour perhaps when the first large drops pattered down on the street below. It was only then that the two Kolines withdrew, shutting their window behind them. A drop splashed on Nejla's arm as she said:

"Don't you think it's funny their belonging to the police?"

All they could see now was a dark window except on either side where there was a faint suggestion of the white muslin curtains inside.

IV

The first time he saw her sauntering along with the crowd Sonia was arm in arm with two other girls, one in white, the other in pale blue, both with bare legs and their hair falling freely to their shoulders. Perhaps Sonia had given each a little squeeze to call their attention to him, for as he approached they looked at him, not laughingly as so many others did, but with grave curiosity.

Adil Bey passed and forbore to look back at them. The rain had only just stopped in time for them to have a glimpse of the setting sun, which turned the puddles to bronze. As usual, everyone was out for their evening stroll, walking up and down the quays, so that you saw the same faces over and over again. The young man with the bicycle was there too, threading his way through the crowd with the same girl perched on the crossbar.

When he saw Sonia again, Adil Bey wondered whether she and her friends were talking about him. Before he reached them, they

were stopped by a young man in an open-necked shirt, who shook hands with them.

The four of them formed as it were a little island in the moving stream. Adil Bey couldn't stop to watch them. He had to walk on. Only later did he look back to see the little island still in the same place. The young man was laughing. He seemed to be talking to Sonia rather than to either of the others.

The day before, Adil Bey would very likely not have troubled his head about it, but something had happened that very morning, something quite trivial which had however none the less left its mark.

At eight o'clock, when Nejla Amar had opened her eyes, she had merely grunted:

"Make some coffee."

Adil Bey had set to work immediately, impatiently, anxious to see her off the premises as soon as possible. He kept looking at his watch. To the last he had cherished a hope.

In vain! At nine o'clock Sonia arrived and Nejla was still there, lingering in bed. Sonia brought various packets with her, as she had decided in future to do his shopping before she came to work. She wanted to take the things into the kitchen, but Adil Bey stopped her.

"Give them to me. I'll put them away," he said awkwardly, unable to meet her eye.

The whole morning had been like that. He had been ill at ease, and while his visitors talked to him he was all the time listening for sounds from the next room, and now and again, trumping up some excuse, he would sneak away guiltily to see what Nejla was up to.

"Haven't you anything I could read?"

She was still lying lazily in bed. She didn't even speak of going. In the office a queer little man with a beard, dirty and covered with scars, was patiently telling his story, to which Sonia was the only one to pay any attention.

He was a Turk, a real one, born in Scutari. Taken prisoner by the Russians during the war he had been sent to Siberia where he had,

like other prisoners, been set to work with the peasants tilling the soil. He had married there, and had a seventeen year old daughter. And all at once, after all those years, he had decided he could stand it no longer. He had no money and no papers, but standing in front of Adil Bey he repeated obstinately:

"I want to go home."

"But you've got a wife and a daughter, here."

"I want to see my first wife and my other children."

He wouldn't take no. He was told it would be a long and complicated business and probably lead to nothing in the end, but he refused to be discouraged. He would have stayed there the whole day if Sonia hadn't finally got up from her chair and bundled him out of the room.

It was still raining. Drenching tropical rain, typical of Batum, coming down in sheets and making the streets almost impracticable. It provided Nejla with her only excuse for staying. Not that she needed one!

Rain or no rain, Adil Bey's one thought was to get her out of the place.

"You really must go," he kept on saying.

He couldn't forget her presence. The thought of her lying in his bed made him go hot and cold all over.

"Look here! I'll send my secretary out on an errand and while she's away . . ."

At twelve o'clock he said to Sonia:

"Take this letter to the post, will you?"

She looked up at him, got up without a word, and put on her hat. When she came back a quarter of an hour later, Adil Bey was just coming out of the next room. She was wet to the skin, her dress clinging to her body, her hair in rat's tails.

She looked at him again, but without reproach. And her errand had served no purpose. For the next moment, while Adil Bey was groping for something to say to her, the door opened behind him and Nejla Amar appeared half dressed, her hair hanging down her back.

"I can't find a comb anywhere, Adil."

Wasn't she doing it on purpose? As for Sonia, she didn't even smile. Imperturbable as ever she sat down and went back to her work.

That was all. A trivial matter, if you like, but one which had got under his skin. And now, as Adil Bey turned once again by the bronze Lenin standing on the world, his eyes sought the little group in the crowd. They were no longer where he'd last seen them. And a moment later, a little farther on, he saw Sonia's two girl friends each walking with a young man.

The sun went down. The puddles lost their lustre. The sea went dull. A jazz band struck up in the bar for foreigners in which Adil Bey hadn't yet set foot.

"What sort of place is it?" he had asked his secretary, who had answered with a contemptuous look.

Three times he went the length of the quays without seeing her. Then, chancing to look up at the big building on the front he saw her sitting at one of the first-floor windows with the young man facing her.

From where they were, they could see right over the heads of the people and across the bay, and Sonia's eyes gazed into the distance with a vague look in them. The man was leaning forward, talking to her. No doubt she was listening, but without looking at him, perhaps without actually hearing his words, and on her face was a subtle look of peace and contentment.

The merchant ships in the anchorage, with patches of red lead on their sides, heaved slightly in the almost imperceptible ground swell. A Greek sailing ship had arrived the night before, and her three masts cut across the green mountain-side.

The people strolled on, one stream going this way, the other that, and Adil Bey looked into their faces with quick furtive glances as though he was afraid of them.

The remainder of the town was empty. The little side streets running down towards the quays were muddy and black like sewers. The air which drifted from the refineries smelt of petroleum. These

young men and girls, these shaven heads and open-necked shirts—they all belonged to the world of oil. The workmen listening to a lecture in one of the ground-floor rooms of the big building had their eyes riveted to a diagram drawn in blue and red, a diagram illustrating oil production.

To possess a bicycle like that, the young man with the girl on the cross-bar must be some sort of a specialist—in oil of course.

Adil Bey had once ventured into their restaurant. Sonia having given him a note in Russian to admit him. It was whitewashed like their offices. The tables were of unvarnished deal. People eat with their shirt-sleeves rolled up, their elbows on the table. Since they said nothing, they gave the impression of being at work. The meal consisted of soup, some mince with boiled buckwheat, and a slice of black bread. A girl was busy counting the plates as they passed, while another impaled the green coupons onto an upturned spike. No doubt there were others checking what went on in the kitchen.

Adil Bey had felt as much out of it there as he did among the evening strollers on the quays. What a joy it would have given him to see people playing backgammon in front of their houses or an old man smoking a hookah.

As for old people, there weren't many to be seen, and the few he did see looked for the most part like his customers at the consulate. If there were any amongst the crowd, they seemed to have no contact with it. They drifted past, sordid wraiths that no one seemed even to see. If they were on the ground, people avoided treading on them as they would avoid a cow-pat.

Twice again and then a third time he walked the whole length of the quay, by which time darkness had fallen completely. Most of the windows were lit up in the house of the clubs and trade unions. Someone somewhere was playing scales on a saxophone.

Sonia was still there, gazing out to sea, the young man still talking to her in a confidential tone.

Adil Bey knew now—throughout the town, people were living one or two families to a room, to say nothing of the kulaks and
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their families who had to bivouac in the open. Every morning the queues would form outside the co-operatives, dispersing only after the notice was put up to say there were no more potatoes or flour or whatever it was they were selling.

That was Batum. And then suddenly a sign would be switched on, just as it might be in Paris or London—the word *Bar* in enormous letters. If you pushed open the door a liveried porter would rush forward to take your hat while through the gap between the heavy plush curtains you would have a glimpse of soft lights and dancing couples.

Adil Bey sat down at the first table he came to and looked round. For the tango all the lights were switched off except those concealed in the big drum, which looked like an enormous moon. Adil Bey had heard the same tango played in Vienna and in Istanbul with the same subdued lighting and the band hardly visible in the shadow.

At Istanbul too there would be sailors, women in cheap silk dresses, the same whisperings and gigglings, the same smell of perfume and liqueurs, the same waiters in white jackets going from table to table.

“What can I get you, Monsieur?”

He was addressed in French. He was handed a wine list which had been opened at the champagnes. At the same time he became conscious of someone making signs to him from the next table. It was the noisiest table there, and at it were some half-dozen men with bottles of whisky and champagne in front of them. The man who was making signs was dressed all in white, with his shirt unbuttoned. He was leaning back in his chair which looked as if it might go right over at any moment.

“Come over here, chum!”

Adil Bey got up and came forward hesitatingly. A large hand shot out and gripped his.

“I’m John. Of the *Standard*. You’re the new consul, aren’t you? I’ve heard about you from the Pendellis. Bring another glass, waiter.”

With a wave of his hand he indicated the officers at his table, who came from the ships in harbour.

"Comrades! Comrades, all of us! Which do you fancy, whisky or champagne?"

He was drunk. He always was. Just as he always dressed in white, with his shirt open on to his powerful neck. Another thing he always did was to drive through the streets at top speed, his brakes screaming as he went round the corners, suddenly stopping dead within an ace of running over a child.

"How's that bitch, Nejla?" he asked after draining his glass.

In spite of his condition he seemed to be studying Adil Bey. His face was flabby with bags under his watery eyes. As a rule the latter wandered aimlessly, looking at nothing, but when they did focus on something his mouth would harden and his features set with a touch of haughtiness.

"Getting on nicely?"

He shrugged his shoulders at the sight of Adil Bey, disconcerted, groping for an answer.

"Idiot!"

"What?"

But John was one of those people with whom it was impossible to be angry. If he called you a fool it didn't sound the same as it would with anybody else.

"I said: idiot! . . . Don't you realise we've all been in her clutches at one time or another? . . . Waiter! Put some more champagne on the ice."

On the floor the couples were silhouetted against the glowing moon as they turned in front of the band.

"Anyhow, you haven't told her any secrets, have you?"

"Secrets? I don't understand."

A Belgian, who had been dancing, returned to the table bringing his partner with him. He couldn't talk to her, and for the rest of the evening he gazed at her, smiling, while he stroked her arm with his hand.

"Have you been here long?" Adil Bey asked the American journalist.

"Four years."

"Do you like it?"

John laughed. That is to say, a sort of gust was expelled from his lungs, carrying with it some shreds of tobacco that had been on his lips. But he didn't bother about things like that. He didn't try to be polite. Not even agreeable.

"Here's your health! If you've got any!"

He drank whisky from a beer glass, but he never seemed to get any drunker. At the table the conversation was desultory. Occasionally one of the officers would make a remark to his neighbours, or one of them would get up to dance. Sometimes John's eye passed vaguely over Adil Bey, sometimes it rested on him in keen scrutiny.

"Fed up already?"

"No. The thing is: I haven't yet found my feet."

"If you're ever in trouble you can always come to me. You know where I live, don't you? Right at the end of the earth; by the pipe-line."

"Thanks. Do you mind if I ask you some questions? . . . First of all, about Madame Amar, do you think she belongs to the *Ogpu*?"

This time John answered sternly:

"I'll give you some good advice. Never ask a question like that. Never. Not to anyone. But since we're on the subject, the waiter here is one of them, so are the women, so is the porter and everybody else."

The strange thing was that he didn't even lower his voice to say that. Two of the musicians, who were quite close to him, looked at him impassively.

"The best thing is not to ask any questions at all. If your parcels come through with half of what they ought to contain, leave it at that. Be thankful for what's there. If you're robbed, keep quiet. If someone falls down dead in your office don't make a fuss about it. Just wait patiently till the carcass is taken away. And, by the way, if your telephone doesn't work it's because it's not meant to."

"Did you know Fikret who was here just before I came? They arrested him when he got back to Tiflis."

"What's that got to do with you?"

"As for my predecessor, who died here . . ."

But John shut him up. Pushing Adil Bey's glass towards him, he growled with a sort of raucous humour:

"Drink! Drink! That's the best answer. Let the days roll on, and soon it's weeks, then it's months, then it's years. And one day perhaps your Government will remember there's a chap called Adil Bey in Batum and will have the bright idea of sending someone to take his place!"

He paused for a moment, then went on:

"Don't come here too often. And when you meet officers from the ships, don't open your mouth too wide."

"But what about you?"

"Me? I'm on the *Standard*!"

And suddenly there was that haughty look on his face again. Perhaps at bottom there was much the same arrogance in his attitude to foreigners as there was with Pendelli, only in his case it somehow failed to give offence.

"Waiter! You can bring that bottle now."

Then he said something in English to the British captain who sat on the other side of him.

Adil Bey had already put down three glasses of whisky, sufficient to take all the sharpness from the objects around him. With a slightly crestfallen expression he looked at the American, who took no further notice of him. He would have liked to talk more with him, to take him into his confidence.

He didn't really know what he would have said to him, but he would have brought the conversation round his secretary. Perhaps John knew something about her.

The thought of Sonia infuriated him. He wondered whether she was still at the window with the young man. He could understand now her contemptuous look when he had mentioned the bar. Most of the women were coarse-featured working-class women or peasants whose faces were heavily made up. They danced clumsily, laughed stupidly.

Sometimes a couple slunk off somewhere behind the scenes.

Another couple, concealed by a curtain, were making a lot of noise.

"Do you come here often?" Adil Bey asked the captain of the Belgian ship, who sat next to him.

"About every other voyage. When it isn't Texas, it's generally here."

"Tanker?"

"Tanker."

"You get more fun in America."

"Not a bit of it. There's no fun for us. Where we go the pipe-line is miles away from the town. We're loaded in six hours. Hardly time to go to the cinema."

"Don't you call anywhere on the way?"

"Never."

Opposite him, the other Belgian was trying to talk to his girl in a mixture of English and German, but in the end he could only make her understand with gestures, and even then precious little. Still, she laughed at him obligingly, and he laughed back at her.

A very young officer was dancing with a woman in green who was a whole head taller than he was. She was really quite a good-looking girl, perhaps the only one. To Adil Bey's surprise, John grabbed the man's coat the next time he passed, saying in Italian:

"Not that one!"

"Why?"

"I said: *not that one!*"

And John looked away, while Adil Bey rather shyly put in:

"Let me stand a round now."

"No. Go home to bed. And don't forget what I've told you. Nor where I live—over by the pipe-line."

The big house on the quay and the people walking up and down in front of Lenin's statue seemed infinitely far away. Adil Bey was reluctant to leave the soft lights and the music, the gentle patter of conversation in various languages, the clatter of saucers, the clink of glasses.

Yet even here, even in this place modelled on all the cabarets of

the other world, the world he knew, he still felt ill at ease. He found himself looking surreptitiously at everybody, the waiters, the merchant-ship officers, the musicians, and even at John himself. He wasn't accustomed to looking at people like that and he was ashamed of it.

But was it his fault?

There were a few women hanging about outside. For a moment he hesitated. The music and warmth of the cabaret still clung to him. Listlessly he stared at the dark quay, the motionless ships, the lights reflected in the water.

Suddenly there was a red flash. He stood there for a moment, not understanding what it was, not even connecting it with the bang that followed it instantaneously. Someone was running. The women stepped forward a few paces.

They stopped dead, and he suddenly realised what it was that he had witnessed, that he was witnessing, for the past and the present were telescoped into one.

A man staggered forward. It was the man who had fired at him who was running away, and Adil Bey had had time to notice that he was wearing a green cap. The wounded man advanced a few more steps, leaning forward, then fell to the ground with a dull thud.

The runner's steps still echoed. When Adil Bey made a move, one of the women warned him with a gesture to stay where he was.

The body lay barely fifty yards away. The next moment a policeman was bending over it. Then two other men appeared from nowhere, picked it up, and dragged it away with the legs trailing on the ground.

"Who is it?"

The women couldn't understand him. Unconsciously he had addressed them in Turkish. Already they had passed on to other business and were turning on him their professional smiles.

It was when he started to walk away that his legs told him he was drunk. A little farther on he passed the house of the clubs and trade unions which was now shut. Except for the little circle of light

round the bar, the town was dark and deserted. He splashed through the puddles. Twice he started, thinking he could see a dark figure skulking in a doorway.

When he came within sight of his own house he almost broke into a run and his hand shook a bit when he thrust the key into the lock.

There was no light of course. The electricity had been switched off long ago. What about the bar? The lights were still on there. They must have a special supply from the power station or a generator of their own on the premises.

It was a thing apart. It didn't really belong to the town. The only people who went there were from the ships, here to-day, gone to-morrow.

The women there all belonged to the secret police. At least, so John said. He ought to know. He seemed very much at home there.

As for the women loitering outside, they were no doubt in the same boat. The only difference was that the ones inside had better clothes. Presumably they had somewhere to retire to. But the ones in the streets? Where did they take their customers?

The air was sultry because of all the moisture rising from the muddy ground. Adil Bey threw open his windows and took off his jacket. He had a horrid feeling, a sort of aching void.

It wasn't merely the emptiness of his own room that oppressed him. The whole town seemed empty. In all of it, there was only that one little spark of life on the quay.

Was everybody asleep? All those people he'd seen sauntering up and down the quay? Weren't there a few whispering couples here and there? Wasn't there someone reading in bed before going to sleep? No. Of course not! There was no light to read by. A mother, then, tending a sick child. Cutting off the electricity couldn't stop people being ill!

Nejla's scent still hung about the bedroom. It brought his mind back to John then to the first time he'd met her, at the Italians! And to her husband with his little moustache and patent leather shoes,

leaning on the mantelpiece, talking in an undertone to Fikret, whom he had seen off at the station.

The window opposite was wide open. The moon was shining and by its light anything white in the room showed up with astonishing sharpness.

Nadia Koline's pillow, for instance. And, against it, her black straggling hair. Some underclothes hung over the back of a chair.

He had only to lean out a little to see Sonia's bed on the right. It too was white, a white rectangle of perfect symmetry.

He looked again. It was impossible to be mistaken. The bedclothes were undisturbed. Sonia had not come home. Nadia turned over, and so close was she that Adil Bey could hear the creak of the springs.

So in that great pool of darkness that was the town there was someone at any rate besides himself who wasn't sleeping—his grave, pale-faced secretary, Sonia!

V

Why had his water supply been cut off? For, if he went to fetch his water from the landing, it was because the tap in the kitchen had run dry. It had been working all right when he arrived and for a few days afterwards. Then suddenly, not a drop.

"Perhaps they're mending a pipe somewhere," suggested Sonia at first. "If you wait, it may come on again."

A few days later, however, she offered another explanation.

"It may be that it's your own pipe that's choked up. I'll ask a plumber to come and see to it."

Of course the plumber never came. Over and over again Adil Bey was told he was coming, but he never would. Never.

"He may have lost your address," said Sonia on one occasion. "I'll go and see him again."

And another time:

"It isn't a working day to-day. I expect he'll come to-morrow."

So when he got up in the morning, Adil Bey had to slip on some trousers and take a jug out on to the landing. There were rarely less than six people at the tap. He had to wait his turn, and he had a particularly long wait if a woman was washing her hair. He just stood there as patiently as he could. Nobody spoke to him of course. They didn't try to. They didn't even look at him. And he knew it was those very people who belonged to the committee of management that ran the house. It was they who had cut off his water supply!

By the time he got back with his jug of water, there were already a few people queuing up outside the consulate door. With his hair still ruffled and his braces hanging down he couldn't have looked much like a consul in their eyes.

But what did that matter?

He no longer made tea in the morning. He couldn't be bothered to. He simply opened a tin of condensed milk and drank it down neat.

He was down to the last of the clean shirts he had brought with him from Turkey. As for the pile of dirty ones, he didn't know what to do with them. Would anybody consent to wash them for him? The window opposite was shut. The sunshine was softened by an almost imperceptible haze which foretold a suffocating day, to be followed as likely as not by a thunderstorm in the evening.

Adil Bey combed his hair, after wetting it with eau-de-Cologne, put on his jacket and went into the office, where he had already heard sounds of activity.

Another day began, just like the many that had preceded it, and no doubt just like the many that were to follow. Sonia was sitting quietly in her place, looking as composed as ever, her hair drawn tightly back from her forehead. And, as usual, she said:

"Good morning, Adil Bey."

The sun was shining on to his desk and would be playing with his papers for the next hour and a half.

"Bring them in."

He already had a headache. When Sonia opened the door, the room was invaded by such specimens of humanity—miserable, dirty, some half-witted, some wild and savage—that once again he looked at them with bewilderment, wondering where they could all have come from. Even now, Adil Bey was often quite unable to guess their race. Sometimes they would speak in a dialect nobody could understand, not even Sonia, and after a fruitless struggle to make themselves understood, would slouch off discouraged.

Some of them came from the mountains over by Armenia or Persia. Some of them, heaven knows for what reason, had started their trek from the confines of Turkestan or Siberia.

Even those whose language could be understood had such endless and complicated stories to tell that it was often impossible to make head or tail of them. Sometimes they were quite disarming.

"But what is it you want me to do?" asked Adil Bey of one of them.

"Buy me a new donkey."

And, try as he would, Adil Bey couldn't get him to talk about anything else but that donkey.

To-day he hardly bothered to listen. He was sick to death of the whole show. What was the use of this farce? Even in the most serious cases he was utterly unable to get any satisfaction from the authorities. What really interested him this morning was that the window opposite remained obdurately closed. Right in the middle of a peasant's lamentations, he turned to Sonia to ask:

"Is your sister-in-law ill?"

A glance across the road, and she had followed his train of thought.

"No," she answered. "She's working."

The peasant went on talking just the same, only a tone higher.

"Is this the first time?"

"Yes. She's starting to-day in the accounts department in the state refinery."

This almost homely chat went on, accompanied by the eternal

complaint of the peasant whose black eyes were fixed on Adil Bey. The latter's nerves were on edge, but he went on doggedly, quietly.

"It was hot last night, wasn't it?"

She nodded. She didn't seem in the least embarrassed.

"You had your window wide open."

"I wasn't there."

"I know."

The peasant's voice had risen almost to a scream, while a hopeless look had spread over his terra cotta face.

Adil Bey gave him an encouraging nod to keep him going. Without that accompaniment he felt he would hardly be able to ask the questions that were on his mind.

"Did you sleep out of doors?"

"No. At a friend's."

"The young man I saw?"

"Yes."

She spoke in such a simple and matter-of-fact way that he wondered whether, after all, there really was anything between her and the young man.

"Do you love him? Are you engaged?"

"No. He's a friend."

Adil Bey got her to tell the peasant to come back another day. The next was an old woman who wanted a divorce, though she couldn't for the life of her explain why. And there were another fifteen or twenty to come! Adil Bey let them talk while he looked at Sonia, sometimes at her hand as she took down notes, sometimes at her fair hair, her black dress, her thin girlish shoulders.

It was as hot as the early haze had promised. The rancid stench of his visitors was all the more disgusting blended with the scent of his eau-de-Cologne.

All the same these were the best hours of the day, or at any rate the least painful. The time passed. When he'd heard out the last, it would be about one o'clock. What then? What was he to do with himself all the afternoon? If he lay down, he couldn't have a nap, as it would make it still harder to sleep at night. If he went out there

was nowhere for him to go. He couldn't wander about for ever in those streets that were like ovens.

On that day, as on its predecessors, he would drift about his rooms trying to find something to occupy his mind till it was time to go out for the evening stroll amongst the crowd, who were now getting used to him and ceasing to take any further interest in him. Then to come home, go to bed, sleep, wake up, drink his tin of condensed milk, and queue up at the tap on the landing.

"Is your sister-in-law glad to have a job?"

"Why shouldn't she be?"

"Did she apply for it?"

Sonia pretended not to hear that one, burying herself in her notes. It was then that Adil Bey, without any precise reason, got up from his chair, threw a churlish look at everybody, and snarled:

"That's all for to-day. The consulate's closed. They must come back to-morrow."

Sonia looked up. She seemed to be hesitating, on the verge perhaps of making a protest, but before she had time to say anything he had left the room.

He looked at himself in the glass. He was getting a bit puffy under the eyes himself. Nothing like John of course, but all the same noticeably. His complexion was dull, and there was something a bit downtrodden about his whole appearance.

He listened to the sounds coming from the office and the waiting-room, the shuffling of feet, the voices gradually fading away.

When all was quiet, he went back into the office and began to walk aimlessly up and down. He avoided looking at Sonia who was sitting in her place, going on with her work.

"Aren't you feeling well?" she asked calmly.

"Rotten."

"Perhaps you'd like to see the doctor?"

"I've no desire to be poisoned."

He had an idea she was smiling, but when he swung round on her abruptly, she was as grave as ever.

"How long was my predecessor here?"

"Two years. At least I think so. I was only with him for the last year."

He sat down, but the next minute he was on his feet again.

"Who's going to do the housework now at your brother's?"

"We'll all have to do our share."

"You can't deny she's been forced to go to work. Anybody could see she was house-proud."

"Isn't it natural?"

"Suppose she had a baby?"

"She'd get three months' paid holiday, and after that three half-hours a day for feeding it."

"And if you had one?"

He thought that would startle her, but she didn't move a muscle.

"It would be exactly the same."

"Even if you weren't married?"

"Why not?"

What was the matter with him? What business was it of his? None. He couldn't help it, however. Something drove him on. Standing at the window he called Sonia over to him.

"Look at them."

He pointed to the people queueing in the boiling sun outside the co-operative. Some biscuits had just been delivered and a few small fragments had been scattered on the pavement. Immediately five or six women had pounced on them, kneeling down to gather them up.

"Well?" asked Sonia. "What of it?"

"Do you dare tell me that those people aren't starving?"

"They're not starving. You can see for yourself they're alive and well. Haven't you got poor people in your country? Aren't there millions of unemployed in America and all the other capitalist countries?"

He thought of her as he had seen her the previous evening at the window of the big house with the young man sitting opposite her. He thought of the workers attending the lecture, of the man practising the saxophone, while he was wandering all alone in the street.

"What can you buy with the four hundred roubles a month you earn?"

"What do you mean? I buy what I need."

"That's what you've told me before. But I know the prices of things now. A pair of shoes like the ones you're wearing costs three hundred and fifty. Your dress costs at least three hundred. A bit of meat . . ."

"I don't eat meat."

"Doesn't your brother either?"

"Only when he goes to the communal restaurant."

"How much does he earn?"

"Four hundred. The same as me. Party members won't take more than that."

It gratified him to detect a slight quiver in her voice as she added:

"You mustn't get the idea we're unhappy."

"And if you had to queue like the people opposite?"

"I'd do it."

He tried another line, jumping at the first thing that crossed his mind. He was letting himself be carried away.

"You belong to the *Ogpu*, don't you?"

"I belong to the party."

He'd had no plan in his mind when he'd sent all the people away. He certainly hadn't foreseen this absurd conversation. But it had suddenly become an imperious necessity to break down Sonia's calm assurance, which he found exasperating.

"How old are you?"

"Twenty. I told you before."

"Why did you go home with that young man yesterday?"

"Why shouldn't I go home with him?"

"Do you love him?"

"Do you love Madame?"

She didn't mention any name, but threw a glance towards the bedroom.

"That's not the same thing."

He was not merely making a fool of himself. He was behaving

like a cad and was acutely conscious of it. Beads of sweat stood out on his forehead, which was puckered by a frown. Fortunately he was standing a little behind Sonia, for he could hardly have looked her in the face.

He felt like seizing her in his arms and pressing her to him, saying anything that came into his head.

He didn't dare. It was quite impossible, and all he could do was to stare savagely at the closed window on the other side of the street.

Then, abruptly changing his tone, he asked:

"Have you given up hope of finding me a servant?"

"No. I'm still looking."

"You know perfectly well you're never going to find one."

"It's very difficult."

"Because I'm a foreigner, isn't it? People lose caste if they work for foreigners. They may even get into trouble with the *Ogpu*."

She smiled.

"Can you deny it?"

It was all going wrong. This wasn't at all what he wanted. He could have burst into tears.

"Listen, Sonia . . ."

"I'm listening."

Couldn't she help him just a little bit? She didn't need to say anything. She didn't need to throw her arms round his neck. All she had to do was to drop her insufferable smugness. Perhaps she was afraid of doing so, for she turned away from the window and went back to her place.

"Do you hate me?"

"No. Why should I?"

"What do you think of me?"

"That you'd much better go back to your own country."

That just about put the lid on it. He flared up.

"Oh! So you think I can't stick it out, do you? You think you can get me down with all your obstructionism, with all your mysterious officialdom and hugger-mugger! Well, you're making a mistake! This isn't the first time I've been up against it. Did you

ever hear of the Dardanelles? I was there! Went right through it. And the trenches were so full of dead that sometimes you had to walk over two layers of corpses! And we didn't have any servants there, I can assure you! Nor condensed milk either!"

Even this sudden outburst failed to disturb her gravity. Not a flicker of a smile. If her face betrayed any feeling at all, it was one of curiosity. But he hadn't finished.

"I've still got a bullet embedded in the back of my skull, and, as it can't be removed, I'll carry it with me for the rest of my life . . . And when the revolution broke out, do you know how I joined Mustapha Kemal in Asia Minor? There were three of us. We got hold of a caique—a boat only eighteen foot long—and sailed right along the Black Sea in the middle of winter."

He had to tell her these things, because of what he'd seen in the glass just now—his dull grey complexion and sagging shoulders. But he had come to the end of his stroke and couldn't find anything further to say.

Why couldn't she say something?

He turned and looked out of the window to get his breath back and calm down a bit. When he looked at her again, Sonia was studiously going through her notes.

"Sonia!"

"Yes."

"It made me sad, last night . . ."

"What did?"

"To see your bed empty. I'd never have believed you could . . ."

"Could what?"

"Could go home with that young man. How many others have you been with like that?"

"I don't know."

"How long has it been going on?"

"About two years."

He studied her profile while a medley of disconnected thoughts crowded through his mind—the four hundred roubles a month she earned, the black bread and potatoes that she had for her dinner,

the little iron bedstead in the room over the way, the water which she too, no doubt, had to fetch from the landing in the morning, the . . .

Yet her clothes were not lacking in style and her face was serene and determined.

It was going to be like the week before—long hours of waiting for the thunderstorm to bring relief. The sky was now colourless. A humid pall hung over the town, making the air heavy to breathe.

"What's the matter, Adil Bey?"

He had wrenched off his collar and tie. Without them he looked quite absurd standing in the middle of the room.

"You ought to sit down."

That was exactly what he didn't want to do, as he hadn't yet given up the idea of taking her in his arms. Sometimes he edged up to her, bracing himself to take the plunge, but each time his courage failed him at the last minute.

The telephone bell rang. Sonia answered it, then simply handed the receiver to him.

"No . . . No . . ." growled Adil Bey. "It's quite impossible . . . I'm not well to-day . . . No. I can't see anybody . . . I tell you. I can't . . . All I feel like is coiling myself down in a corner like a sick dog . . . Good-bye . . ."

It was Nejla.

"Is that really true?" asked Sonia coolly.

"I don't know."

All he knew was that he didn't know what to do with himself. The heat and stuffiness were unbearable. He didn't feel like eating, yet his stomach was gnawing at him as though he was hungry.

"Do you know what you ought to do? . . . First of all go and have a bathe. Then go to the botanical gardens, which you haven't seen yet. By the short cut, it's only an hour and half's walking taking it easily. It's a wonderful place. Even foreigners have to admit that there's nothing better anywhere in the world."

"And then what?"

"Then you'd feel pleasantly tired and have a good sound sleep."

"Very good advice!" he sneered. "Have you followed it yourself?"

"Yes."

"All alone?"

"Why not?"

He could have slapped her face. The idea of walking seven or eight miles in the heat all alone to visit their damned botanical gardens! . . .

"Of course, you wouldn't condescend to come with me?"

"I'm afraid I couldn't."

"Why? Because you'd be bored with my company?"

"It's not that."

"No. It's always the same thing! Because I'm a foreigner! You might come under suspicion. It's all very well for the women at the *Bar*. They can consort with foreigners. But that's what they're paid for. And by the *Ogpu* too! . . . I'm right, aren't I?"

"The police may ask them questions. There's nothing wrong with that."

"And they question you too, don't they?"

"I didn't say that."

"But you can't deny it. . . . Last night they killed a man within fifty yards of me."

She looked at him enquiringly.

"The man who fired the shot was wearing a green cap."

"Don't the police ever shoot in Turkey?"

"Perhaps. But it's not the same thing there. If a man's shot in the street, everybody runs to help him. Last night I'd have done the same, but one of the women warned me off."

"Because it's no business of other people."

All the same there was a suggestion of a smile in her light blue eyes which to some extent mitigated the callousness of her words.

"Sonia."

"That's the third time you've said 'Sonia' without adding anything."

"Do you want me to add something?"

"No."

At that, he smiled too. He began to relax. He had suddenly the impression that they weren't such miles apart after all.

A shutter was closed in the street below. That would be the co-operative having exhausted its stocks. Looking out, Adil Bey saw about forty people reluctantly making up their minds to go home with their hands empty.

"I forgot to tell you about your washing."

The window opposite opened. Koline was the first to get home for dinner. He lit a cigarette. In the semi-obscurity of the interior, Adil Bey could just see him opening some packets and putting their contents on the table. He hadn't bestowed so much as a glance on the windows of the consulate.

"Did you see him this morning?"

"Yes."

"Didn't he say anything to you?"

"What should he have said? . . . About your washing—if you give it to me, I can send it to the laundry with ours. It goes to-day. Can I have it?"

She went through into the bedroom. The bed was still unmade and Adil Bey's pyjamas were lying on the floor. She picked them up.

"In this cupboard?"

"Yes . . . Sonia . . . I want to ask you a question . . ."

"Still harping on last night? I simply can't understand you. You make mountains out of something that isn't important at all."

"I wasn't thinking about that young man."

"About what then?"

"About me . . . If I asked you . . ."

He spoke very quietly, for the window was open and he couldn't help fearing he might be heard across the street. Sonia had picked up an armful of dirty linen. Adil Bey stood between her and the door. He had heard Nadia Koline come in and the clatter of plates as she laid the table.

"Hurry! They'll be waiting for me," said Sonia.

She turned towards the door. In a few seconds it would be too late.

"If I asked you, one night, to . . ."

She didn't let him finish. Heaving a sigh, she answered.

"That *would* complicate things, wouldn't it?"

She hadn't said no. She hadn't got angry. She hadn't laughed. She had to pass Adil Bey on her way out and he was standing in a position in which he was out of sight of the people opposite. She understood perfectly why he was there, yet she didn't hold back.

"Sonia!"

He snatched her into his arms, so moved that he didn't think at once of kissing her. His hands gripped her frail shoulders, on which there was hardly any muscle at all. He bent down and stroked her neck with his cheek, ruffling her fair hair. To his astonishment he felt her surrender herself to him.

"Sonia!"

He touched her lips with his, then pressed them so violently that she almost fell over backwards. When he let go, he stood there awkwardly, disconcerted. She still held his washing. With the other hand she smoothed her hair, smiling at him strangely.

"Why do you use scent?" she said.

"It's only eau-de-Cologne. Don't you like it?"

"I don't know. I've brought you some smoked fish and some goat's cheese."

She had moved over towards the window, and was looking at her brother and sister-in-law who had already sat down to their meal.

"I must be off now."

Adil Bey was left alone. He wasn't feeling gay, not even happy. Going into the kitchen, he surveyed the things she had put down on the table, but he wasn't in the least tempted to eat. When he heard Sonia's step below, he didn't even go to the window to watch her cross the street.

In the room opposite they had some butter to-day. Adil Bey could see Koline spreading some on his slice of black bread. Nadia was chattering away to him, no doubt giving an account of her first morning's work.

Sonia came in, dropped Adil Bey's washing in a corner, threw her hat on the bed, and sat down in her usual place with her back to the window.

It seemed as though she was talking of Adil Bey, for more than once Koline's glance wandered to the windows opposite, though it was impossible to read anything from the expression on his face.

Why did Nadia laugh? She didn't smile, she laughed. What was there for her to laugh at? Could it be what had happened in the consulate?

And what was Koline doing now? He seemed to have stopped eating. Was he writing something in his notebook?

There they were, the three of them, happily feasting on their meagre provisions, crowded in between two beds and a washstand. Between his mouthfuls Koline sometimes took a puff at his cigarette, which he then laid down again on the window-sill.

Wouldn't Sonia look round? Adil Bey felt sure she would. Keeping as much out of sight as possible against the far wall of the kitchen, he waited for it to happen. And presently a little twitch of her neck warned him it was coming.

She did indeed turn round, in the middle of a mouthful. For a moment she saw only the untouched food on the table, and her eyebrows went up, as much as to say:

"What's the matter? Aren't you eating?"

It only lasted a couple of seconds. Then her brother looked across the street, followed by Nadia, who once again burst in a peal of laughter. With that, Adil Bey strode across the room and shut the window with a slam.

He was humiliated, absolutely crushed. Once again, he went into the bedroom and studied himself in the glass, scrutinising himself mistrustfully as though he was someone else, and this time he was convinced he was ill.

Then and there he sat down and wrote a letter to Istanbul asking them to send him a preposterous quantity of bromide.

VI

Adil Bey was often to recall that instant and be tortured once again by the vision of Sonia with her mouth full turning round to look at him, of Koline's blank expressionless stare, of Nadia's peals of laughter.

Actually it marked the end of one period and the beginning of another, but he knew nothing of that as he sat longing for the impending thunderstorm.

He didn't feel like work, and when Sonia came back in the afternoon he remained obdurately shut up in his bedroom, sitting on the bed. As a matter of fact he hoped she would be forced to stop in her work to come and ask him something, but, when an hour had elapsed without her appearance, he brushed his hair and went into the office.

"Have you had a nap?"

"No."

From the first moment, he was conscious that something had changed, though he couldn't say what. Sitting at his desk, he watched her working. He tried not to look so sulky, but he couldn't help it.

As for Sonia, she was in a gay mood, very gay indeed, though it wasn't manifested by any exuberance. She wrote, as she always did, with the application of a schoolgirl. Whenever she looked up, however, her eyes were sparkling.

It was a deep-seated gaiety which he had never seen in her before. There was no derision in those smiling eyes, and they smiled on everything around her including him. To get the sulky look off his own face, Adil Bey went back to the bedroom.

Three or four times he went into the office, but never to stay for long. Sometimes he studied Sonia's neck, so slender and white above her black dress, sometimes her hands, but always waiting for her to look up, so that he could see the sparkle in her eyes.

By five o'clock, when she began to put her papers away, they

hadn't exchanged half a dozen sentences. At half-past, as usual, she put on her hat and then turned to face Adil Bey squarely and frankly.

She must have known what to expect. He came forward awkwardly, determined yet humble. He wanted to take hold of her again by the shoulders and pull her over to the same place as in the morning.

"Do you really mean it?" she asked.

Then in the same tone, reaching for the handle of the door:

"I'll come to-night. Keep the lights switched off."

He saw her again later, coming back from the beach, then sitting down to supper with her brother and sister-in-law. They had their lights switched on and the window closed.

At the consulate, Adil Bey switched his light off quite early, as Sonia hadn't said what time she was coming. He paced up and down the room. Sometimes he sat down for a few minutes, but was soon on his feet again.

And Sonia came. He recognised her step on the landing. She opened the door, and looked back into the staircase before closing it behind her. He could just make out her face and hands as white splodges in the darkness. The light was still burning in the room opposite. Drops of water began to fall at last from the upper reaches of the sky.

Adil Bey didn't speak, nor did he make a move. Sonia put her handbag down on the desk and took off her hat. Then at last she came towards him, saying:

"Here I am."

How many times had she come to him during these last three weeks? Ten, perhaps. Adil Bey had watched for her every evening when she went out after supper. And each time she had glanced up at his window, giving him an almost imperceptible nod which meant:

"Yes."

Or, it might be a shake of her head.

When that happened, there was no use his making any sign of protest. When she said no, she meant no. And no it was!

She arrived soon after darkness had fallen and left when her brother turned back into the room after smoking his last cigarette at the window.

The first night someone had knocked on the door of the consulate and they had held their breath in the darkness waiting to hear the steps move away. A little later the telephone bell had rung and Sonia had stopped Adil Bey answering it.

The window opposite was open, in spite of the rain. And when Nadia had gone to bed Koline had stayed by it for a while enjoying the fresh air cooled by the storm.

They were close enough to have carried on a conversation across the street had they wanted to. Sonia was as calm as ever, so calm that Adil Bey couldn't help wondering why she'd come.

He was trembling all over as he took her in his arms, as he slipped off her black dress and explored her girlish body which she surrendered simply, casually.

"Why are you in such a flutter?"

He could just see her eyes a few inches from his own, eyes which looked at him pensively and with curiosity.

"You're a funny man!"

She said that much later as she laced up her shoes, while he stood at the window resting his forehead against the glass.

And now, three weeks later, did he know any more about her than before? Was he happier or more unhappy?

He often looked at her during office hours, to find her invariably calm and concentrated on her work. And at those moments he had the feeling there was no contact between them—absolutely none.

Still more closely did he watch her at mealtimes, as she sat with Koline and his wife. Adil Bey studied them too. Was it possible they didn't know what was going on? If they did know, was it possible that they didn't care?

Adil Bey tried to change his manner to Sonia. He wanted to use endearments when speaking to her, but somehow they wouldn't

come. Often as he held her in his arms a look of anguish would suddenly come into his face.

"What's the matter with you?" she would ask, smiling.

What was the matter with him? Simply that he suffered from having her there and being at the same time utterly incapable of getting close to her.

"Don't you love me, Sonia?"

"It depends on what you mean by love."

She was gentle and at times even caressing. But what did that mean? Did it mean anything?

Adil Bey hardly went out nowadays. But one day, at about ten o'clock in the morning, Nejla Amar blew into the consulate and started going for him for not having been to see her.

As usual, the room was full of people. Adil Bey looked helplessly at Sonia, who jerked her head towards the bedroom. It was the only thing to do: he led Nejla there and shut the door.

"You know my husband's coming back next week, don't you?"

"Was it you who rang me up the other night?"

"No. Though there's no reason why I shouldn't. You've no right to drop me like this."

Who could it have been then, that first evening? He had taken for granted it was Nejla. And who could it have been who had knocked at the door?

"I don't know what's the matter with you, Adil, but you've changed."

She took off her hat and her gloves and looked in the glass.

"What have you been doing with yourself since I saw you last?"

"Nothing."

"Aren't you even going to kiss me?"

On the other side of the door Sonia was dealing with the visitors, listening to their tales of woe. Two hours had elapsed before Nejla went away in a thoroughly bad temper. She and Adil Bey had almost had a row.

"You've been listening to tittle-tattle, haven't you? Somebody's been saying things about me. . . ."

"I assure you . . ."

"Who have you seen?"

"Nobody."

"You've been seen in the bar."

"I went once."

When Nejla crossed the office, Sonia didn't even look up from her work. Adil Bey went back to his place, Sonia pointed to a man sitting in a corner who, both in face and get-up, looked every inch a pirate.

"He wants to see you personally."

"Yes," said the consul. "What is it?"

"When you've finished with the others. . . ."

They dealt with the others, Sonia taking notes as usual.

"And now, what is it?"

But the man looked askance at Sonia and muttered in Turkish:

"It's private."

Sonia understood and got to her feet, expecting to be sent away.

"Don't go," said Adil Bey.

And, turning to the man:

"It's all right. You can speak out."

At last the man held out some grubby papers which had been stuffed away inside his shirt.

"Is this your passport?"

"No. It belonged to a man who's dead. He told me, if anything happened, to bring his papers here, so that you could let his sister know. She lives in Smyrna."

Sonia had understood that this was not a case to take notes on, and she busied herself with her files.

"Tell me about it!"

The man went to the door first, to make sure no one was listening.

"I took six of them across the frontier into Anatolia by a mountain path. Just as we were through someone started firing at us. One of them caught it."

"Do you do much of that business?"

The man didn't answer. He picked up his fur cap and made for the door, merely grunting:

"You'll see about it, won't you?"

The morning was over. The premises looked more dreary than ever now that they were empty. Sonia put on her hat.

"Are you angry?" asked Adil Bey.

"What about?"

"That woman?"

"It wasn't your fault. What else could you do? . . . Would you mind if I had the afternoon off? There's a squadron of warships anchored in the bay."

"By all means. . . ."

How could he kiss her or show any sign of tenderness when she stood like that, so prim and proper, in front of him? Besides, his mind was wandering. He thought of the man who had just gone, of Nejla, who had left a trail of scent which got on his nerves.

"Then I'll see you to-morrow morning, Adil Bey."

"Right. Good-bye."

All the afternoon he was tossed about from street to street like a cork in a tideway. He had only the vaguest idea what was going on, except that whatever it was obviously had to do with the visit of the warships Sonia had spoken of. At the first turning he came to after leaving his house, he ran into a cordon of mounted police blocking the way.

He turned back, and by a detour reached the main street, where the pavements were crowded with spectators. Others were clustered at the windows, from all of which hung red flags. Banners with inscriptions stretched across the street from wall to wall. High overhead was an immense white flag bearing a huge head of Stalin.

Adil Bey had just caught a glimpse of what must have been the head of a procession when more police, baton in hand, began to push the crowd back, and he was squeezed into a doorway.

From there he saw next to nothing except for a lot of flags and banners, many of the latter with inscriptions or heads of Lenin.

There were several bands. Once or twice Adil Bey caught sight of sailors' heads with long ribbons hanging down from the back of their caps.

There was no cheering. No one even spoke. Except for the bands and the sound of marching there was nothing to disturb the vast silence.

As soon as the procession had passed, the crowd moved off, all in the same direction. At one moment Adil Bey saw a raised platform in the distance, but he didn't get near it. Instead, the eddying crowd cast him up on the quay.

Not far from the merchant ships anchored in the bay were five warships. Motor-boats plied to and fro on the satiny water. On the front wall of the building of the clubs and trade-unions some young men had just been rigging up rows of electric lamps which formed gigantic letters.

Adil Bey nearly jumped out of his skin when he suddenly heard a motor horn immediately behind him. A car stopped, and there was John at the wheel, grinning at the start he'd given the consul.

"Well? How's things?"

He was in his shirt-sleeves, red as ever in the face.

"Coming my way? Jump in. . . ."

Whether he wanted to or not, Adil Bey could find no valid reason for refusing, so in he got.

"Aren't you invited to the banquet this evening? They're giving a grand dinner to the officers of the squadron, followed by a dance.

With John it was always impossible to know whether he was laughing at himself or other people, or whether, on the other hand, he was being serious.

"To start the festivities off, they've just shot someone."

"Who?"

"A bloke. It's next door to my place that they do that sort of thing, in the courtyard of the *Ogpu* barracks. They brought the fellow out about two o'clock. He hardly seemed to know what was happening to him. They propped him up against the wall and

plugged a few bullets into him. Seems he made a practice of taking people across the frontier."

They had reached the refinery.

"Where shall I drop you?"

"Here."

Adil Bey had gone white in the face. For a moment he hesitated, with his foot on the running-board. It was with the utmost difficulty that he managed to say:

"Had he a moustache?"

"A magnificent black one, like the peasants have in your country."

"Thanks."

"How's Nejla?"

But Adil Bey didn't even hear. He walked quickly in the blazing sun, his head buzzing as though in a swarm of bees. Presently he came up against another police cordon, but by dint of several detours he succeeded at last in reaching the public offices where he paid his weekly visits to the alien's department. The entrance door was wide open, so were all the doors inside, but in vain Adil Bey wandered along corridors and peered into rooms—he couldn't find a living soul in the place.

When he got back into the street the ceremonies were apparently over. The crowd were now strolling about aimlessly and scattered about amongst them, in twos and threes, were stalwart, pink-faced sailors, looking very fresh and well-fed.

They were all fair, tall, and broad-shouldered, rather inclined to be fat. Nordic types. From the Baltic no doubt. But they certainly seemed very happy to be in this sunny, beflagged town of the south.

Everyone was in festive mood, and it wasn't long before the sailors were hooking up with the girls of the refinery.

Adil Bey looked about for Sónia. He went back to the consulate to see if she'd gone home, but the Koline's window was shut.

Suddenly he made up his mind, and a few minutes later rang the bell at the Italian consulate.

"Is Signor Pendelli in?"

He could hear people moving on the veranda. The manservant asked him in, and the next moment Signora Pendelli was welcoming him with simple cordiality, just as if there had never been any estrangement between them. And Pendelli, who was wearing a cream-coloured colonial suit, actually got up from the chair in which he had been lolling. A complaining voice broke in:

"And what about me? Aren't you going to say how-do-you-do to me?"

It was Nejla who was stuffing herself with cakes.

"Well! You've been a long time coming to see us again," said the hostess, and there was no trace of sarcasm in her voice.

The veranda was bright and pleasant. They were having tea, as on his first visit. Adil Bey noticed the two flags that were protruding from the first floor, one Italian, the other Russian.

"I see you've got a red flag out."

"We can't help ourselves. Now that Italy has recognised the Soviet Government. And you?"

"I didn't know . . . I just came to ask you . . ."

"Tea or orangeade?" asked Signora Pendelli, whose shoulders were tanned by the sun.

"No, thank you. . . . It seems they've just shot a man. He's one of my nationals. He was in my office this morning."

Pendelli lit one of his cigarettes and calmly puffed out a cloud of smoke.

"What do you want to know?"

"First of all whether it's true. And, if it is . . ."

Pendelli pressed an electric bell. A man in spectacles came in and the consul spoke to him in Italian. The man, after a quick glance at Adil Bey, nodded.

"It's true," said the consul. "He was arrested at the station where he was waiting for the Tiflis train."

"Do sit down," pleaded Signora Pendelli.

Mechanically, he did as he was told. But he couldn't sit still. He wanted to be reassured. When the man in spectacles had left, he looked round a little anxiously, then blurted out:

"This morning he told me he helped people across the Turkish frontier."

"Well?"

"He only told me, in my office."

"Were you alone?"

"Yes. At least there was only my secretary."

Nejla burst out laughing.

"The sister of the chief of the harbour police," she sneered.

Pendelli shrugged his shoulders.

"What more is there to say?"

"The man may have been under suspicion for some time."

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because, if he had been, they'd never have let him reach your consulate."

"Won't you have one of these cakes, Adil Bey?"

"No, thank you. Please excuse me. This is the first time . . ."

"That you hear of a man being shot," sighed Pendelli. "But, my dear friend, you'd better know that every month a few people are withdrawn from circulation. Do you think anyone worries about it? Go on! When a man sees his own son arrested before his eyes, he doesn't even ask why!"

"What would you do in my place?"

"Nothing at all. The man's dead, isn't he? So you couldn't do him any good anyhow. And be polite to your secretary and don't say a word about this business."

For the last minute or so Nejla had been looking quizzically at Adil Bey.

"Perhaps our friend is only too polite to his secretary," she suggested, with a vindictive smile.

"What do you mean?"

"That she's a pretty little hussy, and that it's the first time I've seen a secretary doing housework for her boss."

Pendelli smiled at his cigarette. It was his wife who came to the rescue.

"Now don't go teasing Adil Bey. You know he doesn't like jokes of that sort."

"Let's hope it is a joke. If it isn't, he'll learn to regret it!"

"Do you know the first thing you ought to do?"

This time Pendelli wasn't sneering. He was obviously in deadly earnest.

"Get home as quick as you can and hoist a red flag."

"Thank you. . . . Forgive me for butting in like this."

"Not at all! Not at all! This house is always open to you any time you like to come."

Adil Bey's reception had been quite different this time, though the impression it made on him was slightly marred when, on the pavement outside, he heard Ncjla burst out laughing and the consul saying:

"Hush! He can hear you."

And her answer:

"I don't care if he does."

Returning from the show, a posse of mounted police trotted down the streets which echoed with the clatter of the horses' hooves on the cobblestones.

More sailors with girls in white. The crowd was drifting down towards the harbour. Adil Bey had to cut his way diagonally through it to reach his consulate and hoist the red flag.

This time the window opposite was open. Sonia was standing in front of the looking-glass in a new dress, while her sister-in-law was kneeling with pins in her mouth, giving it the finishing touches. It was a black dress of some satiny material adorned with stiff flounces.

When he hoisted the flag, the pulley creaked, and Sonia looked round. She gave him a little smile, a furtive smile that disappeared in a second. Then she said something to Nadia who got up and shut the window.

A band was still playing not far off, and it was quite a moment before Adil Bey realised the telephone was ringing. When he lifted the receiver no one answered.

VII

He didn't move a muscle, didn't even smile, when Signora Pendelli said as she put the cards away:

"You know, Adil Bey, you're rapidly becoming a first class bridge player."

Pendelli pushed back his easy chair, leant back in it, and lit a rose-tipped cigarette. It was the time when, as a rule he half shut his eyes and yawned and sighed till someone gave the signal for the party to break up, but on this occasion he seemed in no hurry for his guests to leave. Turning to John, whose shirt as usual was open at the neck, he said:

"Help yourself to another whisky."

A fire was burning in the huge tiled stove. From outside came the steady patter of rain and now and again a splash as one of the gutters overflowed. The drawing-room was lit by oil-lamps, as the electricity had already been cut off.

"What about our Persian friend?" asked John, pouring out his drink. "Was he dispatched by the morning's train?"

"With a couple of men to keep him company," answered Pendelli complacently. "Do you know how many rugs he'd succeeded in getting across the frontier in less than a year? A hundred and eighty! To say nothing of the samovars, icons, and all the rest."

He turned to Adil Bey.

"It was helping him that was the downfall of your fellow-countryman, Fikret. Do you remember—that first day you came? They were hatching their little plot in this very room. The next day Fikret was quietly put out of harm's way. Nobody's ever heard of him since. Amar fared better. But then he had consular status. The Soviet Government merely asked for him to be recalled immediately. And to keep him out of any further mischief he was escorted to the frontier.

"Is it true he's left his wife behind?" enquired Signora Pendelli.

"She isn't his wife. Just a bit of stuff he picked up in Moscow

when he was secretary to the Legation. She wouldn't have been admitted into Persia."

The air was damp and muggy. Though Pendelli was more awake than usual, a restful atmosphere played round the two lamps whose shades were of an ice-cream pink. Pendelli stretched out his legs and sank back even deeper into his chair.

"One day less to go," he mused in dreamy contentment.

"Will you be home in time for Christmas?"

"The *Aventino* gets to Genoa on the twenty-second. We'll be in Rome on the twenty-third."

That's what he was musing about—Genoa, Rome, the place where he belonged. He was getting two months leave, and the prospect of it was enough to keep him awake after his bedtime and also to enable him to speak of Russia with unaccustomed detachment. Indeed it gave him a peculiar pleasure to speak of it as it enhanced the delight of getting away.

"I hear you've been to Novorossisk, John. Is it true they've been eating children there?"

"Not quite," corrected John. "It's true the police were tipped off and went to a house where they found a man in the cellar sitting by some tubs of brine which contained the remains of his wife and daughter. They had to shoot him down, as he fought tooth and nail, defending what he claimed his property. He'd gone stark mad."

"What do you say to that, Adil Bey?"

"Me? Nothing."

"Our friend has changed a lot in the last three months," remarked Signora Pendelli approvingly. "At first I thought he'd never stick it out. Yet he has. And put on weight too."

It was true. He had got fatter. But it wasn't a sign of health. He had become flabby in a way which made him look years older. The expression in his eyes was dull and lifeless.

"And now you're going to be the only representative of the Diplomatic Corps."

He smiled politely. Since he had been coming every week to play bridge with the Italians, Signora Pendelli had gone out of her way

to be kind to him. She seemed to have taken him under her wing, and it was no doubt due to her that her husband no longer used Adil Bey as a foil for his somewhat malicious sense of humour.

"Well! We must be going now," said John, emptying his glass. "I expect I'll be seeing you before you go. In any case I'll be on board to see you off . . . Are you coming Adil?"

As usual, he was half drunk. For some reason he hadn't got his car with him. They put on their oilskins and gum-boots, then splashed through the mud with the rain running down their faces. Ever since the autumn rains had started it had poured without ceasing. The sun hadn't broken through once, and some of the streets had been transformed into rivers. From time to time the two glistening black figures bumped into each other as they tried to avoid puddles or slipped on the muddy cobbles.

"Adil! . . ."

"Ycs?"

"Drinking?"

"No. Why?"

"Nothing . . . Shall we drop in at the *Bar*?"

Adil Bey knew very well what was in John's mind. As Signora Pendelli had said a little earlier, he had changed, and it could easily have been put down to drink.

It had been nothing of the sort. Adil Bey couldn't have explained himself just what had happened. It had started with the Turk who'd been shot. He had been very upset about that incident, and then had suddenly become calm, as though something had snapped inside him.

The next day he had said nothing about it to Sonia, in fact he had hardly said a word to her the whole day. For a good fortnight he hadn't once asked her to come up to his room.

And in the absolute solitude in which he lived, his face had gradually acquired a sort of limp impassiveness which was what John had put down to alcohol.

It wasn't that. Nor was it indifference.

On his arrival at Batum he had called on the Pendellis, expecting to be welcomed into their circle. Instead, he had received an affront.

He had wandered about the streets, and the crowd had made way for his passage, closing again behind him, avoiding all contact with him. In desperation he had clung frantically to Sonia, only to find that, as his mistress, she was further from him than ever.

Was it because he was a Turk and the others Italians or Russians?

Or was it simply because he was Adil Bey?

Whatever it was, as soon as he tried to live as he understood living, he had invariably found himself up against a blank wall.

That was the trouble and the rest had happened more or less automatically. He had simply become inert, unresponsive, as unresponsive as those around him, perhaps even more. It was easy, if not inevitable. You just carried your solitude about with you, even when you went to play bridge at the Pendellis or called on the official with the shaven head who dealt with aliens.

You walked about in a protective shell, showing a face from which all feelings were excluded.

How was it he had taken so long to understand? Couldn't he have seen from the very first day that everyone else was in the same situation, shielded from their neighbours by whatever protection was best suited to their temperaments? With John it was drink. The Pendellis were security entrenched in their homely comforts, which they would doubtless have taken with them into the middle of the Sahara.

What about Sonia? What about her brother? When Koline came home from his work, was there any real intimacy between him and his wife?

At the co-operative restaurant, everyone eat buried in his own thoughts, which were not allowed to come to the surface. And the crowd? Was each person in it alone too as he walked up and down the quays with the others, turning, like them, at the little black Lenin standing on the world?

Was that what it all amounted to? In that case Adil Bey was no different to anybody else. There he was in his own little shell looking at others with the mistrustfulness of a solitary animal.

They splashed on through the wet night, John and he. As they

came to the bar they passed two or three women huddled in a doorway. The American waved to them familiarly.

"Do you know them?"

One could talk to people and even play bridge with them without coming out of one's shell.

It was a mournful scene, but there was something compelling about it, something which Adil Bey was beginning to like—the electric sign lighting up a stretch of muddy road, the driving rain, the three women in gum-boots whose make-up had got smeared in the wet, the sombre port, the lights of the ships. John paused for a moment and threw an ironical glance at his companion.

They must have been as pretty a sight the one as the other at that time of night, their faces wet, their features drawn, their whole beings sagging with boredom and the consciousness of the slow but inescapable deterioration that was going on within them. They eyed each other. They despised each other. John looked at the women, then back at Adil Bey.

"I know them all," he said.

He seemed to be looking right through the walls, visualising invisible rooms.

"Hundreds of them, Adil Bey! Work it out for yourself at the rate of one a day for four years."

He pushed open the door and let the porter take his oilskin. Adil Bey was trying to digest what John had just told him. He hadn't thought of him in that light. He studied him out of the corner of his eye, trying to imagine him turning into one of the dark lanes with a girl hanging on his arm.

"Do you give them roubles?"

"They much prefer dollars, which they can take to the *Torgsin* and buy anything they like."

"Hundreds!" muttered Adil Bey to himself.

He had only seen the girls inside and the few clustered round the entrance.

They stood for a moment near the red plush curtain by the door, gloomily surveying the place. As usual there were a few sailors there.

There was something condescending in the way John spoke to Adil Bey.

"And there are hundreds more still that I don't know, all sorts of little girls, like your secretary for instance, girls who earn hardly enough to fill their bellies, yet have to keep themselves neat as well. Your predecessor used to go out on the tiles too. We often used to meet each other in strange places and in strange company. And I shouldn't be at all surprised if she had gone the same way as the others."

The place was lit by the glowing parchment of the big drum, and as the women passed in front of it their flimsy dresses took on the colours of stained glass. Everything was soft and subdued, save only the table-cloths of startling white.

"Whisky?"

"All right."

John seemed to be mildly amused by Adil Bey, but the latter couldn't even be bothered to take offence. He gazed at the luminous disc, lost in contemplation.

Hundreds of them! . . . Presumably they were his for the asking too. Why hadn't he done like John? . . . Or he could have entrenched himself in creature comforts like the Pendellis. That wouldn't have been quite so easy, since he was a bachelor, but he could probably have done himself pretty well if he'd really tried. Why hadn't he?

A familiar voice greeted him.

"Hallo, Adil, dear!"

It was Nejla who held out her hand, at the same time laughing at his surprise.

"Can I sit at your table? Having a night out, are you? Bad man! A benedictine, waiter! . . . Do you know, Adil, I want some help from you professionally."

John smiled viciously and she turned to him like an old friend, or perhaps an accomplice.

"Have you told him? . . . It's like this, Adil. . . . You've always thought of me as a Persian, while, as a matter of fact, although I was

born in Russia, I'm really Turkish. My grandfather, who was called Ahmed, came from Ankara. And now I want you to do whatever's necessary to get me a passport."

"I'll look into it," he answered, emptying his glass.

He looked at John and her apathetically, wondering whether he had the energy to dance. Less than a year ago, at a similar place in Vienna, with exactly the same music played by the same instruments, he had often danced right through the night.

He had little inclination for it now. Nor for Nejla, though she was no doubt at his disposal. Nor for the other women there, though there were at least two there now who were pretty enough.

Perhaps, after all, it was merely that he was dead tired.

"When can I come and see you?"

"Whenever you like."

"Have you still got your little white mouse with you?"

He gazed back at her uncomprehendingly.

"Sonia," she explained with a meaning look at John.

"Yes."

"Pleased?"

"What with?"

"With her."

He shrugged his shoulders as phlegmatically as John himself. How meaningless it all was! She talked for the sake of talking. He didn't want to talk, neither to her nor to anyone else. He was numbed by the whisky and the sound of the band. He could have stayed there for ever. Without enjoyment. Just because there was nothing else he wanted to do.

The waiters were already clearing the tables. They all three got up. Outside, Nejla wanted to take Adil Bey's arm, but he calmly disengaged himself.

"Aren't you going to see me home?"

"No."

"What about you, John? Hallo! Haven't you got your car?"

"No."

So there was nothing for them to do but say goodnight and separate, each going his own way. There were no women huddled in the doorway now. The electric sign suddenly went out.

Adil Bey trudged on, regardless of the rain trickling down his cheeks, regardless of the puddles through which he splashed till his trousers were wet and muddy right up to the knees. On his right, he could hear the waves breaking on the beach, but nothing was visible, not the faintest gleam on the surface of the sea.

He knew every street in the town by now, even every doorway in which the homeless spent the night huddled together on the doorstep.

Those miserable creatures he knew too. He knew all! He had been in the co-operatives, the workers' restaurants, and in offices.

It was no business of his. He was the Turkish consul, whose job was to look after his own nationals.

Yet it had become a necessity, a devouring passion. For him the town had become a living creature, a person almost, and one who had rejected his advances, or rather ignored them, leaving him to wander about the streets all alone like a stray mangy dog.

He hated it, as he might have hated a woman he had courted in vain, and the discovery of its blemishes gave him a mournful satisfaction.

Everybody could get work if they wanted to! Everybody could get enough to eat!

That's what Sonia said. And Sonia was the very incarnation of the town. She was as cold and secretive as it was. She accepted his caresses as the crowd allowed him to wander up and down in its midst between the statue of Lenin and the refinery.

With eyes full of mistrust he had prowled around the market place. On one occasion he saw an old woman in rags who had obviously been standing for hours in the rain offering three small fishes that were already stinking.

She looked as though nothing would discourage her. Or was it that she had never had any hope?

"How much?" he asked.

For he had provided himself with a Russian grammar and dictionary which, with a touch of defiance, he had placed ostentatiously on his desk. From them he had learnt a few words and phrases.

"Five roubles, Comrade."

Adil Bey's lips curled sarcastically as he thought of the well fed sailors of the Russian Navy, of Sonia's club, of her new dress for the ball which had been given in honour of the squadron, of her complacent answers, of the man who had been shot for leading people across the frontier.

He hurried back to the consulate, and without even looking at Sonia he said casually:

"There's lots of fish in the Black Sea, isn't there? . . . In that case I suppose you get plenty of cheap fish?"

"Oh, yes."

"How cheap?"

"One or two roubles a kilo."

"That's funny. At the market I've just seen three rotting fishes offered for five roubles."

He knew that she had given him a slightly troubled look. He could hear her fumbling with her papers.

"That's in the free market, which we're trying to suppress, anyhow. At the co-operative . . ."

"At the co-operative there's no fish at all. I've just been to see."

"Perhaps not to-day."

"Nor any other day for the last fortnight."

"It depends on the fishing."

For the first time, he'd have liked to see her cry. It would have been a relief to him, though he couldn't have said why.

He tried the experiment of asking her to come to him that night? She came, calm and docile as ever.

Why did she come? To find things out, perhaps. Things which could get somebody shot, and possibly get him shot himself!

What difference did it make to her whether she was in his arms or another's? She didn't love anybody. She went straight ahead, proud,

unbending, with unfaltering steps and pale blue eyes that looked at everybody with no other expression than one of mild curiosity, eyes that could equally well be those of an innocent girl or of an utter pervert.

He had found out a lot of things in his interminable wanderings about the town. They were fatiguing, exhausting, for there were no cafés where he could sit for a while and rest, no friends on whom he could drop in casually. When he asked questions, people would hurry away scared, or answer hastily and turn their backs on him. Once he gave a rouble to a little boy. A moment later he saw him get his face slapped by a passer-by and the rouble snatched from his hand and thrown into the gutter.

Sometimes, as on this occasion, Adil Bey was scared himself. More often he had the guilty look of a man who is out to satisfy some shameful passion.

Why did everybody lie to him?

He would return home snarling with another titbit.

For if he turned an impassive face towards the world, with Sonia the mask was lowered.

"It's three weeks now since anyone in Batum had a potato. Yet at the Lenin Hotel, where the high officials go, they've never stopped serving caviar, champagne, and heaven knows what."

"That's for foreigners."

"They don't get two foreigners there in a year."

"What about your ministers. Don't they eat better than labourers?"

He tried to discover what it was that had happened to him, but without much success. All he could say for certain was that it had started with the man they had shot. It was almost as if he'd been shot in the consulate. And to think that the man had hesitated to speak in front of Sonia and that it was he, Ali Bey, who had as good as vouched for her discretion!

Perhaps he ought to have sacked her. But how could he get on without her.

Since then he had been hovering round her, tormented, vin-

dictive, discouraged, with sudden accesses of panic. For she was beginning to hate him. He was sure of it. Indeed it was just that gleam of hatred which he looked for in her eyes, and which in spite of himself he deliberately provoked.

So John thought he too had taken to drink! And Signora Pendelli complimented him on his bridge!

Adil Bey let himself in and lit a candle, then went through exactly the same procedure as on every other day. Indeed it was just this regularity that wove a sort of intimacy round his solitude and worked upon him almost like a spell.

First of all, he sat down in his easy chair and took off his gumboots and his shoes. After that he sat for a few moments in his socks, looking round him, watching the trembling shadows made by the candle flame. Then he tried to see across the road. He couldn't see anything, but he knew Sonia was sleeping. So was her brother. So was Nadia.

To-morrow he'd tell Sonia about the madman of Novorossisk. A madman! Of what significance was he? None at all. But that wasn't the point. The thing was that Sonia would feel obliged to provide an explanation.

What was it Signora Pendelli had said just before John had arrived? She had been talking about their holiday in Italy when she suddenly remarked:

"As for John, he's been here four years, and in all that time he hasn't once been home. Queer, isn't it?"

Then, looking away:

"He knows more than any of us about what goes on, yet he's never been bothered by the authorities."

What did that mean? That he was one of them too? Why not? Anything was possible. Take this Nejla, for instance, who now turned out to be not Amar's wife at all but a tart he'd picked up in Moscow!

What did it matter, however? The answer was quite simple—to keep your mouth shut. Like everyone else, for that matter. Every-

one. The people in the streets, the people in the offices, and no doubt even Koline too. You had to become a burrowing animal. Your own little hole. That was the thing! With your own comforting little habits.

In the end you came only to think in snatches, as in dreams.

A fortnight before, on one of his periodic visits to the aliens office, he had suddenly been told:

"We've found a woman to do your housework."

He had understood at once, before Sonia translated it. He hadn't been taken aback, but had merely said dryly:

"Thank you."

As for the woman in question, he hadn't exchanged half a dozen words with her. She came in the morning and made a show of doing the office. She fetched his water from the landing. During the morning's work in the office, she pottered about in the bedroom and the kitchen, though they were little cleaner than before.

In the afternoon, if he returned home unexpectedly, he generally found one or two women there with her, occasionally a man. He pretended not to notice their presence.

Had it been suddenly decided that he needed more supervision than Sonia was capable of?

Still sitting in the easy chair, he undid his tie and took off his collar, at the same time calculating that it was exactly three weeks since he had last asked Sonia to come to him.

He was making progress! The first time he'd tried to hold off from her he had only stuck it out for a fortnight. Though when he had finally given in he had done so as gracelessly as possible, disposing of her in the most perfunctory way, and then leaving her, saying:

"I must go out now."

And week by week he had been learning to play bridge at the Pendellis. Signora Pendelli had obviously taken to him, and it was in an indulgent tone that she often said to him:

"What mysterious people you are, you Turks!"

If only he had had his bromide he could have gone to bed early and slept all through the night. It would have helped to pass the

time away. It had been dispatched all right. A hundred grammes of it. Someone had come round with the packet which bore the label of a big chemist's in Istanbul next door to where he'd lived for two years.

"What do you want with all this?"

"I suffer from insomnia. It was your doctor who advised it."

"But suppose you took more exercise. . . . A good long walk before going to bed."

"I tell you it was the doctor's prescription."

"He didn't tell you to take a hundred grammes, did he?"

"Of course not. But I thought I'd better lay in a stock."

"In that case, we'll hand it over to the doctor, who'll dole it out to you according to your needs."

He hadn't protested. All the same, when the doctor had brought round the first instalment, he had thrown it in the fire. There was no point in taking risks.

That's why he lingered in his easy chair till two or three in the morning. He burnt just half a candle each night, then went to bed. In the morning he threw the tea his woman made him down the sink and opened a fresh tin of condensed milk.

There was little work to do in the afternoons, which he generally spent wandering listlessly about the town. He watched the ships being unloaded, chiefly by girls. If he got a chance to take one of them aside he would ask a few questions in Russian.

Then, back in the office, he would ask Sonia:

"How much do those women stevedores earn?"

"From ten roubles a day upwards."

"Can they live on that?"

"Easily. Particularly as they don't have to spend much on clothes."

"And on three roubles a day?"

For once Sonia was at a loss for an answer.

"That's a bit more difficult, isn't it? Even if they have hardly enough clothes to cover their bodies! And that's what those wretched girls are paid—three roubles a day."

"Who told you so?"

This time it was Adil Bey who made no answer. He prowled round the office, sometimes shooting a glance at her out of the corner of his eye. She was pale, thin and narrow shouldered. And wasn't that because she too was undernourished?

One day she had said to him with a slight quiver in her voice:

"May I give you some advice, Adil Bey? . . . Every day you open fresh tins of food. Sometimes you don't eat more than one sardine out of a tin. It makes a bad impression."

"And if I'm not hungry?"

"There's no reason to leave the remains lying about. You could throw them away discreetly."

She had turned her head away. He almost softened, but pulled himself together to snarl:

"No doubt that's what all the visitors come for when I'm not here!"

"Who?"

"People I find in the place when I come back unexpectedly."

"Nonsense! They'd be relations of your charwoman. I know she's got a grown-up son."

"A grown-up son who prics into my papers!"

"How do you know?"

"I've seen him."

In the end there was always one argument for her to fall back on.

"Aren't servants ever inquisitive in your country?"

Admittedly pallor was natural to her, but he felt sure she was paler than when he'd arrived. The last time he'd asked her to come in the evening, he had only done so reluctantly, after hovering about her for a whole hour trying to persuade himself he didn't want her. She had muttered:

"You really want me?"

He had answered no. That had been three weeks ago.

The candle had burnt half-way down, and without a sigh Adil Bey got up and started to undress. He had never bothered to get some curtains. He could see huge raindrops running down the

black window-panes. A small river ran down the middle of the road making the same noise as a forest stream. Because of the rain, the Kolines' window was only open a few inches.

He got into bed and blew out the candle. As usual he lay for quite a while with his eyes open. He thought of Pendelli, who would soon be boarding the *Aventino* and who was so excited about it that he hadn't yawned once.

For some reason it was with Pendelli's face that he saw the man of Novorossisk squatting by his brine tubs, which he was ready to defend against all comers.

Yes. He must remember to speak to Sonia about it in the morning. He was sure she'd find an answer—for instance that no doubt there were people in Turkey who were hungry too. If that was her line of defence, he could show her a picture-postcard of one of the markets at Istanbul, showing hundreds of stalls piled high with foodstuffs. Had she ever seen such a thing as a whole lamb being roasted on a spit in the street? For a few piastres you could get a whole plateful.

How many times a month did she get a mouthful of meat, let alone a plateful? She was of an age when a girl should be filling out, and her little breasts had already a tendency to sag.

Yet she must needs talk as though everything were perfect. Why? What reason was there for this attitude of defiance? They could have been such good friends, if it hadn't been for that. And why did she look at him with that slightly disdainful curiosity, sometimes, he felt, even with pity, when he held her in his arms?

There had been moments when his eyes had gone misty with emotion at the thought that they two were alone, pressed together. And all she could do was to ask coolly:

"What's the matter with you, Adil Bey?"

All right! So much the worse for her! For it wasn't going to last much longer!

She had already changed. Her eyes were tired. She flinched nowadays when she suddenly became conscious of him standing just behind her.

In winter she wore the same black dress as in Summer with only the addition of a coat of thin cloth that was already showing signs of wear.

The girls in the bar were better fed. But John had told him that after two or three months there they were shifted elsewhere before they had time to form any attachments.

They had got rid of one, shot her—this too came from John—because she had opened her mouth too wide to a Belgian second mate. Adil Bey had forgotten to mention it to Sonia. Not that she didn't know. She knew everything. Only, he wanted her to hear that sort of thing from his lips!

Sometimes the downpour outside was suddenly redoubled, the rain coming down in a veritable cataract, and the stream in the road becoming a gushing torrent. It never lasted long, a quarter of an hour at the most, then the rain would revert to its steady patter.

Now that he was in darkness, he could, from his bed, see the window opposite.

Sonia was there. John had spoken about her. So had Nejla. Everybody seemed to know her, as though she was the only girl in the town.

There were plenty of others. Hadn't John spoken of hundreds who'd been kind to him?

As for Sonia, she was wearing herself out—that was obvious. She'd crack up before he did.

He turned over in bed just as he had the impression he was sliding down a steep slope. He was asleep. Even in sleep, however, the patter of the rain pursued him, only it was transformed into the click of a typewriter, while Sonia of the tired eyes turned her head slightly towards him, waiting for him to dictate the next sentence.

He mustn't forget to speak to her about the man of Novorossisk!

VIII

The next day he didn't tell Sonia any of the things he had intended to, not even about the man of Novorossisk.

During the night he had sweated profusely, though he'd had hardly any bedclothes on. It happened to him frequently nowadays. He tried to remember whether he had been subject to such heavy sweats before. In Vienna, for instance, had he ever woken up suddenly to find his pyjamas drenched?

There was another thing which he couldn't remember happening before—waking up feeling more tired than on going to bed. That was the case practically every day now. For a long time he would lie in bed staring at the ceiling, wondering where he was going to find the strength to live through another day. His face, in the mornings, was awful, and he had a bitter taste in his mouth which he hadn't known previously.

This morning the mere effort of getting out of bed brought the sweat to his forehead. It was still raining, naturally, and the air which came through the half-open window was heavy with moisture. Occasionally he caught a faint glimpse of Nadia Koline who was dressing.

Adil Bey looked in the glass before pouring some water into the wash-basin. Once again it seemed to him that the stubble on his cheeks was thicker and stronger than before. He dismissed the idea as absurd, but it was difficult to shake it off altogether, for someone had once told him that a dead man's beard grew at a prodigious rate.

He blew his nose and spat in his handkerchief. It was then that everything changed, that he was seized by a sickening panic which caught him at the pit of the stomach and made his legs feel weak.

He hadn't the courage to look a second time at the handkerchief, on which he had seen a streak of red. He could hear the charwoman floundering about in the office. Then Sonia arrived and the two women started talking. They spoke much too quickly for him to understand a word, but he knew exactly what Sonia was doing—

first depositing her bag on the mantelpiece, then hanging up her hat and taking off her gum-boots.

When he marched in in his sweat-bedraggled pyjamas and bedroom slippers, she looked quite startled by his appearance. That, at any rate, pleased him. He was glad he looked ghastly.

"Go at once and fetch the doctor."

"What's wrong, Adil Bey?"

"I don't know."

He didn't dress. He didn't shave, or even wash his face. He had quite enough to do to keep calm. He paced up and down the room with his hands behind his back, muttering, and each time he passed the looking-glass he stole a glance at himself. Then all at once he came to a halt, seized once again by the same panic as before, remembering that the doctor was a Russian.

He ground his teeth and looked angrily at the door.

"Very well! We'll see!" he said out loud.

And he went on talking to himself.

"I must let him find out for himself. . . ."

The doctor arrived with Sonia, who had fetched him from the hospital. Adil Bey led him into the bedroom, shut the door, then rapped out:

"Examine me."

As he spoke a malicious smile came to his lips as though he was playing a trump card.

"You're not feeling well?"

"Very bad indeed."

"Where's your trouble?"

"Everywhere."

"Put out your tongue. . . . Hum! . . . Take off your jacket."

He didn't use a stethoscope, but put his ear directly to Adil Bey's chest. The latter was so strung up he could hardly bear the suspense.

"Take a deep breath . . . Cough . . . Harder. . . ."

When he looked up, the doctor's face was grave, but not more than usual.

"You're sure you're not taking too much bromide?"

"Quite sure," snapped Adil Bey.

He said nothing of having thrown the stuff away.

"Your whole system seems to be run down, as though . . ."

"As though what?"

"As though, over a long period, you'd been indulging in some drug—or it might be just alcohol. . . . Do you drink?"

"Nothing to speak of. What else could it be?"

"It's difficult to say. You're sure you've no pain anywhere?"

At last Adil Bey produced the handkerchief, and showed it to the doctor.

"That's what's wrong with me!" he said contemptuously.

To his great surprise the doctor looked at it without much interest.

"Is this the first time such a thing has happened to you? It's rather odd, but it doesn't prove anything. I can't find anything wrong with your chest. But if you like to be reassured, you can come round to the hospital for an X-ray."

Why did the doctor pick up the glass of water that was by Adil Bey's bedside? He looked at it and sniffed it, but when he turned back to Adil Bey he merely shrugged his shoulders.

"What treatment are you going to give me?" asked Adil Bey, who hadn't thought of putting his pyjama jacket on again.

"First of all, you must stop taking bromide. . . . You have your meals here, I suppose. Who cooks for you? That woman I saw in the office?"

He looked this way and that, puzzled, worried. Adil Bey watched him intently. He guessed. He waited for a word, which, however, did not come.

"You think it's the food, do you?"

"I didn't say so. There's no reason to think it's the food."

"What else could it be?"

"Come and see me at the hospital. I can examine you more thoroughly there."

"You don't want to say what you think."

"I don't know what to think."

He was lying. He was in such a hurry to go that he felt for the handle the wrong side of the door. Nevertheless he paused for a moment in the office to have a look at Sonia and the charwoman.

"Then I'll be seeing you in the hospital," he said to Adil Bey who had followed him.

With that, he went. Several clients were already waiting. Sonia looked up to ask:

"Will you be seeing anybody to-day?"

"I will."

He threw out the words almost threateningly, then stumped back into the bedroom. As he shaved and dressed, all his movements seemed to have a new purposefulness, and when he looked at himself in the glass, which he did repeatedly, he faced himself fairly and squarely. A little later he sat down at his desk and called his first client forward.

He had never been so peremptory.

"You say your daughter's disappeared, and you think she's gone off with a Turk. I can't do anything for you. I'm not here to recover girls who've run off with men, whether they're Turks or not. . . . Next please!"

At the same time he listened to the sounds made by the charwoman in the bedroom, and kept an eye on Sonia. Nothing escaped him. He seemed to have feelers out in all directions at once.

Sonia's face was as pale as his, but it wasn't the same pallor. For one thing, her skin was dry while his was clammy at the least movement even in cool weather.

She took down notes as usual. Two or three times she looked up at him, and he could have sworn she didn't do so naturally. Each time, she seemed to have first made an effort.

How did he manage it all. He noticed everything around him, followed a train of thought of his own, and was still able to attend to what was being said to him. In fact he pulled people up at once when they started to wander.

"Keep to the point, please."

So much so that the place was empty by eleven o'clock.

"What did you do last night?" he asked Sonia abruptly.

She hesitated, surprised perhaps by his tone.

"I went to the club."

"And afterwards?"

"What do you mean?"

"Where did you sleep? In your own bed or someone else's?"

"I was at a friend's."

She faced him, prepared to meet his eye, but Adil Bey's merely wandered towards the window and gazed into the distance.

"You can go now."

"It's not time."

"I said you could go. And I shan't be needing you this afternoon."

He went into the bedroom, but returned the next minute, to find her putting on her hat.

"Haven't you gone yet?"

She didn't answer. He watched her go, studying her narrow figure over-ballasted by her clumsy gum-boots.

"If you change your mind . . ." she began, pausing in the doorway.

She broke off, however, realising it was no use.

For Adil Bey was already buried in a dictionary, not the Russian but a Turkish one, which was something of a small encyclopædia. First he looked up *poison* then *toxicology*.

"Fools!" he muttered angrily each time.

The fools were the compilers of the dictionary, who offered him only the most useless information. He tried *strychnine*, then *arsenic*. They weren't very helpful either. There was however, a mention of bitterness.

Of course! That nasty taste he had in his mouth in the mornings!

Wasn't it quite obvious then that he was being slowly poisoned? Since when? He couldn't make a guess. Perhaps ever since his arrival. Hadn't they poisoned his predecessor? Then why shouldn't they have gone on using the same stuff on him?

He began to recall things, occasions when he'd felt sick for instance.

"It's all this tinned food, no doubt."

That's what he'd said at the time. Yet hadn't he fed on tinned food all through the war? Often when it was far from fresh too!

It wasn't even an illness that he was suffering from. It was something much less tangible, but far worse. His vitality was just fading away. He had become hollow and flabby. In the morning, when he looked at himself in the glass, he was disgusted by what he saw.

It was arsenic! If it wasn't, it was something of the same sort. A poison, anyway—that was all that mattered. The doctor hadn't been taken in. He knew. He had straight away thought of the bromide and had sniffed at the glass of water.

Adil Bey sniffed at it too. He didn't notice anything, or rather he couldn't be sure it was the water he was smelling. For his sense of smell had become much more acute of late, making him aware of all sorts of subtle odours.

He sniffed at his skin, and this time he thought he could definitely detect something queer.

"There we are!" he muttered.

And the next moment:

"So much the better."

For at least he knew now where he stood. He could do something about it. He would! He paced up and down, talking to himself, now and again glancing defiantly at the window over the way.

His eye fell on the telephone. Whom could he ring up? The Pendellis were much too busy in a last-minute scramble to be off. In an hour's time their house would be empty.

What about John? The American would listen to him disdainfully as he sipped a glass of whisky. Signora Pendelli had hit the nail on the head when she'd asked why he'd been four years at Batum without ever taking a holiday, or, as far as anyone knew, even thinking of taking one. And why did the authorities leave him so free when all other foreigners were kept under the closest observation?

"Hallo! Give me the hospital please. . . ."

He would telephone to the doctor. Just to see what happened!

"Is that you, Doctor? Adil Bey speaking. . . . No, I'm no worse.

But there's something I forgot to mention this morning. I've been having fearful sweats at night. For the last fortnight or so. Also a feeling of oppression, as though my heart might stop beating from one moment to the next. . . . Let me go on. I know quite well what I'm saying. . . . My predecessor died of heart-failure, didn't he? Are you in a position to assure me that it wasn't as the result of progressive poisoning by arsenic?"

He couldn't understand a word of the doctor's answer. The latter seemed to be rattled by the question, the more so perhaps as he wasn't alone. Other voices were audible in the background. In all probability he was advising Adil Bey not to worry but to wait for the results of an X-ray. All Adil Bey could be sure of, however, was that the man wasn't speaking in his natural voice.

When Adil Bey rang off, he looked pleased with himself. He was convinced he had scored a point. He mustn't leave it, at that. He must go on scoring till he'd got the better of them! The whole lot of them!

Above all, he must keep his head. He was cool as a cucumber now. He went over to the glass to admire his calmness. Having done so, he slowly opened a tin of condensed milk which was all he would take for his midday meal.

"And now to eliminate the poison from the system. . . ."

He wasn't at all sure how to go about it. Fresh air and exercise—they ought to be good anyhow. He put on his gum-boots and oilskin and went for a three-hour walk. He walked cautiously and steadily, ignoring his fatigue, his perspiration and rapid pulse. Only when he got out of breath did he stop now and again in the middle of the street to rest for a moment, regardless of people staring.

Let them stare! It was all the same to him! He knew exactly what he was doing, and they weren't going to put him off his stroke.

The rain hadn't stopped, and the narrower, unpaved lanes had a stream of muddy water running down the middle, which in places cut deep pot-holes in the road surface, in others deposited mud or sand in heaps. To add to these impediments was here and there an abandoned barrow, an empty cask, or some pieces of old timber.

At one place he had to step aside to avoid a dead horse whose shiny wet hide showed every bone in its carcass.

There were few people about on the quays, as no work was being done. All the ships but one looked utterly abandoned.

As for the one exception, he could see the Pendellis going up a steep gangway into a small black and white ship, which must be the *Aventino*. An officer was helping the child. Pendelli brought up the rear, obviously making an effort, his fat hand gripping the wet rail.

The sea looked like nothing at all. It was just a vague grey void with a soft humid breath. There was no sign of a breaker on the beach and in the basin no sound of lapping water. Its surface would have been as smooth as a pond had it not been for the thousands of endlessly forming, endlessly interrupted circles made by the heavy raindrops. Thousands? Myriads, and myriads more, stretching all the way to Turkey or farther still.

His gum-boots were heavy and his oilskin made him hot. At one moment he had stepped into such a deep puddle that the water had splashed over the top of one of his boots, so that the sock squelched with every step.

The bar was closed. It never opened in the afternoon. The windows of the big building of the trade unions were wide open, but inside were only two or three solitary figures wandering about the empty rooms. A girl passed barefoot, a sack over her head to keep the rain off. He recognised her as one of the women he'd seen unloading cargo.

The streets were as empty as the quays. The slummy quarter of the town consisted of a network of some fifty narrow streets with no cobbles and more often than not no pavements. The buildings were tall and sombre, not having been repainted for ages, and many panes were missing from the windows. The stones of the cornices looked as though they might fall at any moment, and water poured through cracks in the gutters.

The doors of the houses were wide open showing glimpses of squalid interiors.

They looked as though no one lived in them, but Adil Bey knew better. He knew the rooms were swarming with people who had to squeeze themselves in as best they could between all the beds and the mattresses on the floor. What did they do there except sleep at night. The women weren't busy cooking, since they had nothing to cook with and next to nothing to cook. They couldn't do much sewing as they went on for ever wearing the same dresses.

They waited. What for? No doubt, like Adil Bey alone in his room at night, they waited till it was time to go to bed.

"I mustn't drink any water."

He said it out loud, then shrugged his shoulders, remembering that arsenic had a bitter taste even in very small doses. If the water was tasteless it would be all right. There was tea, of course. That was quite another thing. But then he never drank what the char-woman made in the morning. Nor did he drink coffee, except at the Pendellis—and now they had gone.

He found himself once more confronted by the dead horse, which he gazed at in astonishment. He had had no idea he was back in that quarter of the town.

Hadn't he done about enough for one day? There was no point in overdoing it. He must go about things quietly and calmly. Yes, that was the most important thing of all—to keep a cool head.

He wasn't lacking in nerve or in self-control. Only two or three times had he felt a return of that sickening fear that had taken hold of him in the morning. It was a purely physical thing. It came from nowhere and took him unawares, often when he was thinking about something entirely different. It was like a pain that might suddenly stab you in the side.

But each time he had had no difficulty in talking himself out of it. There was no doubt it did him a lot of good to talk to himself. Particularly about Sonia.

She must be anxious. He had sent her off for the rest of the day without a word of explanation. After the doctor's visit he hadn't spoken a word to her, at any rate not about his health. Was it Sonia who had poisoned his predecessor?

"The thing is to find out whether he had the same charwoman as me. . . ."

Adil Bey had seen a woman there the first day, but he was quite unable to remember her face. . . .

He went on turning things over and over in his mind as he plodded on through the streets. He was quite calm. Signora Pendelli had been quite right to compliment him on his bridge playing. He had taken to the game at once.

And this was just the same sort of thing. He had to play his cards right. Only, he had no partner now. He was all alone, absolutely alone. The Italian consulate was closed. So was the Persian.

There was only one person he could rely on and that was himself, Adil Bey, a solitary consul in the middle of a strange wet town in which thousands of people were stowed away out of sight, crouching in their dens behind those windows patched with cardboard.

"Another thing: make a search of the flat. Look at everything, and—most important—note the exact position of each object. . . ."

His heart was all right—he was sure of it now. For a while he had thought it might be the source of his trouble, but now he knew it was only the arsenic. And the arsenic didn't worry him at all. Why should it? He wasn't dead. And getting rid of the poison was only a matter of time.

Provided, of course, he wasn't given any more!

He climbed the stairs and was hardly out of breath at all when he reached the landing.

His charwoman was standing near the tap with the two other women. All three stared at him without saying a word, without even betraying the faintest sign of recognition. Just like animals! No, not quite. Animals do at least sniff at each other as they pass!

But it had been like that with his charwoman right from the start. She never said good morning, and in the afternoon she simply went off without a word. She came into his home. Ostensibly she worked for him, and he paid her. That was quite meaningless, however. In reality she came when she liked, did what she liked, and went at her own sweet will.

And it was the same with his neighbours. People he'd stood on the landing with or crossed on the stairs would pass him in the street as if he simply didn't exist.

Each in his own corner. No doubt. But he more than any. And in another corner, on the other side of the street, were the Kolines whose habits he studied as he might have those of fish in an aquarium.

If his corner was the loneliest of all, it was none the less true that someone had managed to gain a foothold there in order to put arsenic surreptitiously into his food or drink, someone who walked and talked, who came and went, and who had decided he must die.

When? How long had it been given? It depended on the dose, which was no doubt carefully calculated. So here was an unknown person who knew something about him which he didn't know himself, the most intimate and mysterious thing of all—the date of his death!

And this person was watching him put on weight, only it was a nasty flabby sort of weight. It was Signora Pendelli who had been the first to remark upon it. And in her house he had been drinking Turkish coffee regularly every week. It was made specially for him.

He couldn't very well suspect Signora Pendelli. And yet, why not? In cases of this sort hadn't you got to start off by suspecting everybody, even the most unlikely?

Admittedly she'd gone off to Italy. But that didn't prove anything either. She might have miscalculated, might have thought she'd seen the job through, and not wanted to be there when he died. . . .

No. He was going off the rails. He could rule out the Pendellis and look elsewhere. Supposing, then, it was officially inspired—why should they pick on the Turkish consul? Why not the Italian? Why not Amar? He had been allowed to go home unmolested though he'd been robbing the Russians right and left. . . .

When Adil Bey entered the office, he saw Sonia standing there. Her eyes were thoughtful, so full of thought that for a moment he wondered what was wrong. There certainly was something wrong.

Of course! She had no business to be there at all. He had expressly told her not to come back in the afternoon.

She was embarrassed. She looked at him anxiously.

"You're soaked," she said.

She had her coat and hat on, and her gum-boots were still shiny with rain.

"What are you doing here?"

She hesitated, still looking at him with those worried eyes.

"I called in to see if you were any better."

"Really?"

So insistently did she gaze at him that it was quite embarrassing. She seemed so strung up that for a moment he thought she would fling herself into his arms.

"I'm quite all right, thank you. There's no reason for you to stay."

For a moment, however, she stood absolutely still, her hands joined over the clasp of her handbag, her thin neck contrasting with her black clothes.

He was just turning to go into the bedroom. At that, she lost her rigidity and started to turn towards the door. On both sides the movement was actually begun and there was no reason why anything should interrupt them, yet suddenly Adil Bey sprang forward and did something quite unpremeditated. He was as much taken by surprise by his action as she was and both looked quite bewildered.

He stood looking down at his podgy hands which were now holding Sonia's bag, which he had snatched from her. She looked in the same direction. She waited. Although he couldn't take his eyes off the bag, he was aware that her breast was heaving. She reminded him of a pheasant he had once brought down with a stone in Albania which had palpitated in just the same way under its warm soft feathers.

Awkwardly he opened the bag.

IX

The lining of the bag was worn. It contained Sonia's cheap fountain-pen, a handkerchief, a powder-puff, two keys, and a few paper roubles.

Sonia was standing by a chair, and, while he was rummaging among these objects, she sat down, so limply that she seemed to have crumbled. Then Adil Bey found a photograph which he removed from the bag and studied. It was of himself, a snapshot whose very existence he had forgotten. It had been taken near the tennis club in Vienna. Dressed in a grey flannel suit, he was leaning against a little sports car, at the wheel of which was the daughter of one of the officials in the Austrian Foreign Office. They were both in high spirits and faced the camera with a gay smile.

There was a bed of tulips in the foreground, and across it lay the shadow of the girl's brother who was taking the photograph. It was all so eloquent that you could almost hear the words:

"Steady! Don't move!"

And the laughing relaxation after the little click, the car driving off, and the thump of tennis balls coming from the hard-courts.

Sonia waited. And Adil Bey, after putting the photograph down on the desk, produced from the bag a little glass tube. Without a word he put that down on the desk too.

With that, he could think of nothing better to do but to close the bag and hand it to the girl. He was breathing heavily and deeply. Twice he walked over to the window before finally planting himself in front of Sonia who still sat lifeless in her chair.

"Well?"

She looked straight at him with contracted pupils. Her face was white, her features drawn.

He was at a loss to know what to do next. He had asked her a question, but without expecting an answer. He picked up the little glass tube. He had no need to examine the contents to know what it was.

III

What *ought* he to do? Get angry? Shout and storm? She still didn't move. She didn't cry. She just sat there unresisting, perhaps not caring, with her white face and two dark, beady pupils.

Ten times he was on the point of saying something, and ten times he gave it up, as the words seemed totally inadequate for the circumstance. Yet he had to let off steam somehow. He looked round for inspiration, and when his eyes lighted on the inkpot he seized it and flung it on the floor.

"How much longer had you given me to live?" he managed to ask at last.

Those words, more than the inkpot, succeeded in releasing his emotions, reminding him that he had been a doomed man. Yet, as he looked at Sonia, there was more despair than hatred in his eyes, like a wounded man or one desperately ill.

"Answer me."

Only her eyes watched Adil Bey intently. All the rest of her was inert.

"It was you who poisoned my predecessor, wasn't it? One of these days I should have died as he did."

He panted, he clenched his fists. What was so intolerable was her impassiveness.

"For heaven's sake say something! Anything you like! Can't you hear me? Say something, I tell you!"

He was ready to shake her, perhaps to hit her. The door opened. The charwoman entered the room on her way to the kitchen.

"Tell her to go away. I don't want to see her again today."

At last Sonia spoke. Turning towards the woman she repeated his order in her ordinary voice. No sooner were they alone again, however, than she sank back into the same immobility as before. For a moment Adil Bey watched the rain trickling down the window-panes. He felt helpless.

"Sonia. . . ."

She looked at him. It was uncanny to see her like that. She made no answer, neither with her lips nor with any movement of her features. Not a tremor went through her to indicate that she was

there, with him, that she heard him, that she took his words in. She looked at him as though he was performing in another world, or on another scale which made him infinitely big or infinitely small in comparison to her.

"Do you hate me as much as all that?"

The words came out in spite of himself. They brought tears to his eyes, and for a moment he had to turn his head away. Slowly he pushed a pile of papers to the edge of the desk, then further, till they toppled over on to the floor.

"Listen Sonia. . . . We've got to work this thing out."

He swung round suddenly, mistrustful, thinking she had come to life. But no. She was sitting there as apathetically as ever.

"I could turn you over to the police, and then . . ."

He broke off. He had moved over to the window again. In the room opposite he could see Koline who had just got home and who was sharpening a pencil.

An old man, walking with the aid of two sticks, was dragging himself so slowly along the street that it was impossible to believe he'd ever reach his destination.

The police. Yes, Adil Bey had spoken of the police. What would he say to them? That someone had tried to poison him?

He came back towards the desk in another sudden change of mood. Standing in front of Sonia he put a hand on one of her shoulders, and at the touch a throb of emotion went through him. Looking sadly into her eyes, he said gently:

"What have you done, my little Sonia. Don't take any notice of what I said just now. You know very well I could never have denounced you. But you must talk to me. You must explain why you . . ."

Her lips were so pursed that the skin was livid, and this grimace somehow contrived to give the impression of a suppressed smile.

"You're not going to, are you? . . . You're going to keep that mouth of yours obstinately closed. . . ."

He let go of her and his voice rose higher and higher as he went on.

"Of course! You haven't left yourself much to say, have you? . . . When I think of how you used to join me here at night, and how I used to call you my little Sonia! . . . For I loved you—I can tell you that now. It wasn't merely lust. I wanted a human contact and could never understand why you denied it me. And all the time, week by week, you were plotting my death!"

He choked at the thought of it. He wanted to hit out, and, finding nothing else to aim at, he banged his fist on the wall.

"That's what you were doing to me, when all my thoughts, all my life was centred upon you!"

He had never been so conscious of it. In fact he had hardly been conscious of it at all. Yet it was true. It stared him in the face now.

What had he been doing with himself ever since he'd come to Russia? He had studied Sonia, hovered round her, tried to get near her.

Sometimes hated her too! Hadn't he tried to make her suffer? Certainly, but that was love. He was sure of it. It had only been love which had prompted him to pry rancorously into the back alleys of the town to return triumphantly with:

"I've seen yet another person eating refuse in the gutter."

Hadn't she made him suffer? Hadn't it hurt him every time she went to that house of the trade unions and clubs where young people of both sexes could get together and enjoy a common enthusiasm. He had hated seeing her in the room opposite. He had even hated to see her go off with a towel under her arm, knowing she would be bathing naked with other girls!

Halting in front of her he started off again.

"I've spent hours watching you, trying to understand you. I've even looked at you through the key-hole like a little boy, to see what you were like when you were alone. . . . And now, will you kindly tell me what it was you put the arsenic into, for I suppose it was arsenic. . . ."

He picked up the tube, uncorked it, then corked it again. For a second he looked as if he was going to throw it out of the window.

"Were you acting under orders? . . . Answer me, will you? . . . All right! If you won't! . . . I suppose you're afraid of your comrades in the *Ogpu*. Oh, I know very well it was you who betrayed the man who smuggled people over the frontier. I didn't say anything, as I was ready to admit you might only have been doing your duty. . . ."

He had ups and downs, oscillating between violence and lassitude. Sometimes it was lassitude which got the upper hand, such lassitude that he felt tempted to lie down then and there on the floor. His voice became plaintive, coaxing. He refused to give up hope, saying to himself:

"She can't hold out for ever."

Then, baffled and disappointed, he began to shout again, to gesticulate, and grind his heel savagely in the papers that were lying on the floor.

"I had been making plans for us . . . I'd thought of taking you back with me to Turkey, of making a home for us on the shores of the Bosphorus. . . ."

His eyelids tingled, but he was determined to hold his tears back.

"I was ready to go further still. If necessary, I would have stayed here in this country . . . I would . . . I don't know what I wouldn't have done. . . ."

Shaking his fist in her face, he screamed:

"You filthy little . . ."

And as she recoiled slightly:

"Ah! So you're afraid of blows, are you?"

With both hands on her shoulders he shook her, repeating:

"You little viper! . . . You filthy little viper! . . ."

Her head wobbled from side to side, backwards and forwards, but her features remained set and her eyes were fixed on him unswervingly.

"Sonia. . . Say something. . . . If not, I think it's I who'll end by killing you. . . . Do you hear that? . . . I'm capable of it. . . . I can't stand this any longer. . . ."

He wept as he spoke. Or was that weeping? His chest was burst-

ing, his throat swelled, his features were contorted, his mouth twisted into an expression of disgust.

But once again his fury ebbed. He no longer had the strength to shake her. He let go of her shoulders and stepped back. And suddenly his eyes opened wide with amazement. He stared at Sonia's cheek and stared again. Something glistened. Was it a tear? He couldn't believe it. He had to be sure. And there, as he looked, her eyelid swelled again, slowly. A large tear appeared, hesitated, then followed the first.

"Sonia!"

He was overcome. He wanted to take her by the shoulders again, but as he approached she drew back, getting to her feet with a look of terror in her eyes.

"Leave me alone."

She looked wildly round her, then rushed to the door, which she succeeded in opening before he could reach her.

"Sonia!"

He caught her just as she reached the top of the stairs.

"Let me go."

"Never. . . . Come back. . . ."

Somebody coming downstairs saw them, but he didn't care. He dragged the girl back into the office and locked the door.

"Why are you crying?"

"I'm not."

It was not far from the truth. She had recovered her composure, though there was still a trace of wet on her cheeks.

"You *were* crying. You'd be crying now if you let yourself go. . . . And you're going to tell me. . . ."

"I've nothing to tell you."

There he went! Off again!

"So that's it! You've nothing to tell me! You poison my predecessor and then start on me, at the same time allowing me to make love to you! And when I ask you for an explanation you've nothing to tell me! Are you utterly cynical? Are you absolutely impervious to all decent feelings? Are you . . ."

He must have looked absurd as he stormed and ranted. For a fraction of a second her lips relaxed into a smile, then she sank into the armchair and buried her head in her hands. Her shoulders heaved.

Was she laughing or crying? Adil Bey looked at her with misgiving.

"Sonia! Look up! I want to see your face."

The night was falling. It seemed as though a cloud of soot was gathering in the air.

"I know what you think. You think I'm a fool. And that's just about what I am and have been all along. A fool to love you. A fool to get tears in my eyes when I held you in my arms. A fool to be jealous of others who came near you. A fool, above all, when I looked at myself in the glass and wondered what was the matter with me."

"Stop. . . . Stop," she begged without taking her hands from her face.

"Stop telling you the truth! Why should I? You can't stop me now. You nearly did. You nearly shut my mouth for ever, and I can see you very well sitting down calmly in this office with my successor to start another day's work—and then, I suppose, to go to bed with him in the evening!"

She looked up at last, and so unexpectedly that he was taken aback.

"Stop, I tell you!"

He would never have believed it possible for anybody to be so pale. He would never have believed it possible for a face to be so completely changed in a matter of minutes.

It was no longer the same Sonia. The eyes were bigger, the eyelids glistening. With its swollen nostrils, the nose had lost its shape. Stranger still, her mouth, which a moment ago had been so drawn and pursed, now showed two blood-red, swollen lips.

She certainly wasn't pretty like that, but he softened at once, and it was in a pleading tone that he said yet again:

"Sonia!"

"No. . . . Let me go. . . ."

She had no thought for what she might look like. She was hardly breathing.

Mechanically she groped for her bag to get out her handkerchief, and it was no less mechanically that Adil Bey held out his:

"Thanks."

"Look here, Sonia. . . . We're going to talk things over quietly. But first of all you must calm down."

Far from calming down, she was seized by another paroxysm. She cried like a child, with all her features screwed up, her mouth opening spasmodically to gasp for air. Her sobs choked her. It was painful to see. Adil Bey tried to take one of her hands, then the other, and finally to stroke her forehead.

She repulsed him each time, her wry mouth stammering:

"Let me alone."

At one moment she wrung her hands so cruelly that the fingers went livid.

"Sonia . . . I beg you. . . ."

He was afraid she might suffocate. He had never seen anyone cry like that before. It was terrible. Her whole body seemed to be writhing in torture.

"You mustn't go on like this, Sonia. You must calm down. Try and talk. It'll make things easier."

He was trembling, partly with eagerness, partly with frustration. In the house opposite Nadia Koline shut the window.

"Don't take any notice of what I said, Sonia. I was out of my mind. It's all a mistake. Of course you weren't trying to poison me. I had no right to suspect you. . . ."

Once again a faint flicker of a smile appeared on the girl's face, breaking through her tears. She began to calm down, looking at him with a strange expression in her eyes that was more like pity than anything else.

"That's it, isn't it? I made a silly mistake, didn't I? Tell me I did. I'll believe you. I swear I'll believe everything you tell me. . . . You see, I love you. Only, you didn't understand. I looked as though

I was floundering about aimlessly, while really all my thoughts were concentrated on you. You were the pivot of everything."

"Don't!" she said in a different voice.

She was better, though drained of all energy. She spoke very gently like an invalid coming out of a long illness.

"Why don't you want me to say these things? Am I wrong?"

"Yes."

"Wrong to love you?"

"Yes."

She had heavy red eyelids and her cheeks were flushed now almost to purple.

To be closer to her, he was kneeling in front of her, holding her knees, and she looked down on him as though from an immeasurable height.

"You didn't do it, did you, Sonia?"

Barely audibly she answered:

"Yes . . . I did."

"But why?"

"You wouldn't understand."

"Yes, I would. I assure you I would. You mustn't bottle it up any more. To make it easier, I'll ask you questions. . . . My predecessor?"

She nodded, with a pale smile in which there was none the less a hint of mockery.

"And with me? Did you begin at once? . . . No? . . . When you became my mistress? . . . Why did you come to me at all? You didn't love me, did you?"

She shook her head and sighed deeply, making a gesture of despair.

"It's no use," she protested.

"What isn't?"

"Our talking. . . . Let me go. . . . Think what you like about me. . . . And you'd better go back to your own country."

She saw Adil Bey's eyes harden. It looked as though he would flare up once again. She put her hand to her forehead.

"No," she pleaded. "You mustn't get excited."

"All right. But you must speak."

"Sit down, then. There in front of me. Don't try and touch me."

It was rapidly getting dark now. They could no longer see each other clearly. There was a sudden splash of water outside, as a gutter overflowed. Big drops were pattering on a zinc roof somewhere:

"Well, Sonia?"

"Haven't you understood anything?"

He felt she might go over the edge again at any moment, but with an effort she kept control of herself. She even forced her lips into a smile.

"You've been out with John, haven't you?"

"What's that got to do with us?"

"Your predecessor spent his nights in much the same way as he does. He drank at the bar. Afterwards he picked up a woman, in the street or elsewhere. It didn't matter who. Anyone would do, a factory girl, a typist, a schoolgirl, or a mother of five children. . . ."

Adil Bey looked at her with a surprise in which there was a tinge of dismay.

"A dollar means a lot to us, or a few francs or liras. We can take them to the *Torgsin* and get things we'd never dream of having otherwise."

He could hear her breathing between the words.

"You've told me yourself, you've told me over and over again—there are people here who are literally starving. But there are lots of others, you see, who believe, in spite of it, who are determined to believe. . . ."

Her voice grew firmer. There was even rancour in it as she leant forward towards Adil Bey.

"Can't you understand yet? Do you know how much work a Russian has to do to buy a tin of sardines such as you toy with every day? A whole day's work! And your predecessor always had a tin or two in his pocket, or some sugar, or some biscuits. He gave them away. To women. In exchange for the only thing they could give

him. Sometimes even with their husband's consent. He used to give them to me too.

" 'Here! Take this,' he would say. " 'It'll do you good. You look as if you could do with a bit of feeding up!' "

Her face was only a pale smudge in the darkness now. Adil Bey turned away from it to glance at the lighted window on the other side of the street.

"Yes, he told me I needed feeding up. And he never failed to add, when he gave me anything, that it was nothing to him. In his country there was plenty. . . . In *his* country, in *his* country—always in *his* country. You too. You never missed an opportunity of rubbing it in. In your country people never starve. In your country you can have as much bread as you like. . . . Your country. . . .

"You can have it! I don't want to hear about it! . . . I'm over twenty now, and I won't have anybody telling me my whole life's been wasted. . . . My mother died in misery. . . . Yes, she was like some of the wretched creatures you've seen here in the streets and come back to talk to me about."

"I was jealous," muttered Adil Bey in the darkness.

She laughed bitterly.

"There was no need to be. Not then. It was already too late."

"Too late? What for?"

"For me! You wanted to know. All right I'll tell you. The other man, your predecessor, I killed in faith, if one may say so. At every second and with every breath he breathed he wounded me to the quick. The first time he had me here at night. . . ."

She heard Adil Bey fidget.

"Yes. At night too," she said callously. "And when I came I'd find quite a feast on the table, which he had laid himself. He would point proudly to some luxury, saying:

" 'I don't suppose you even know what it is.'"

"And he was astonished that I didn't pounce on the stuff greedily. He thought of food as something for which people sell themselves.

"I don't want to think about it. . . . I'd never seen a foreigner at

close quarters before. I'd never read a newspaper that wasn't Russian. . . .

"I had almost the feeling that in getting rid of that man I was saving Russia. . . ."

"And what about me?" asked Adil Bey sadly.

The raindrops still pattered on the zinc roof. The window opposite opened and Koline looked up and down the street, surprised at his sister's continued absence. Adil Bey saw him shut the window again.

"Do you hate me too?"

She didn't answer.

"Why?"

"It's strange that you shouldn't understand. You're like a child. And it's just for that reason that I . . ."

"That you what?"

"Never mind. Let me go. There are things that you'll understand later. You want to know why I hated you, why I tried to poison you? . . . As for the other, it was a mistake. He might just as well have lived. He didn't count. I hated him and wouldn't believe a word he said. . . . With you it was different. You destroyed all I had. . . . And now . . ."

"Now?"

He hardly dared breathe for fear of breaking the spell.

"Don't let's talk about it. I must go. You could see: my brother's getting anxious."

"Would you have gone right through with it?"

"I don't know. . . . The first time, I put the arsenic into the sardine oil."

"The first time? When?"

"When she came."

"Nejla?"

In the darkness, she was unable to see his happy smile. She may have guessed it, however, for she went on:

"Not that I was jealous. . . . After that I was ready to abandon the idea. Then you walked up and down the quay and saw me at the window of our club."

"What did that matter?"

"Why do you want all these details? If you were a woman, or merely a Russian you wouldn't need to ask. . . . Can't you see? I didn't believe in the club any longer. I didn't believe in our committees, our discussions, our lectures, our demonstrations. . . . You came and talked to me about our market, where they sell rotting fish. . . . And I watched you getting paler and flabbier under the arsenic till you were well on the way to being no better than the miserable starving people you saw in the streets. . . ."

She sprang to her feet, and in a raucous voice cried:

"Let me go! You're a cad, a cad, a cad. . . . You've forced it all out of me, and now you're delighted. You lick your lips with satisfaction. . . . You have undone a wretched girl who only wanted to live and who . . ."

She snatched up her bag. He guessed rather than saw that she was wiping her eyes.

Gently, noiselessly, he got up. She moved towards the door conscious of his being just behind her. Had she forgotten that the door was locked? She quickened her step.

Did she really hope to get away? Did she want to? As her hand touched the door-knob he threw his arms round her.

He didn't kiss her. He didn't say anything. It was enough to stand there holding her, while gradually her fingers relaxed their hold of the door-knob.

For the second time Koline opened the window and looked down into the street which was dark and watery as a canal.

X

"Even if they ask me to resign, I could easily get a job at a hundred Turkish pounds a month."

"That makes how many roubles?"

He smiled. She asked the question gravely, not so much because she was interested in the subject, but because it was the first time she had been able to speak of anything of that sort.

And Adil Bey, who had been educated in a Christian school told himself that he had at last found out the meaning of a phrase that had always puzzled his Muslim mind—a state of grace.

He was in a state of grace himself now. He couldn't have explained how or why, but he was absolutely convinced of it. It was something quite simple, but then everything had become simple now, simple and easy, clear as daylight.

"Not to-night," she had murmured with a worn smile when he led her into the bedroom.

"Hush!"

He had smiled too. He had laid her on the bed as though she was a sister. He had dipped a corner of a towel in water to wash her eyes.

"On my forehead. . . . Yes, like that . . . I feel better already."

But her eyes had wandered to the window opposite and an anxious look had spread over her face. It was then that Adil Bey had fetched some large sheets of grey paper from the office and stuck them onto the window-panes.

"There! No one can see us now."

They were both tired out, though there was still a little glint of fever in their eyes. They smiled like people who have returned from the brink of catastrophe and can't quite get over the feeling of being alive.

He was in a state of grace! He no longer peered at Sonia, wondering what she was thinking. She could think what she liked. It didn't matter now. She smiled at him and that was enough.

She felt sleepy and shut her eyes, but when he stopped talking she made him a sign to go on.

"Turning it into roubles won't tell you anything. The thing is that with a hundred pounds a month we can live in a nice flat in the modern quarter of Istanbul. We can have good food and go to the theatre every week. You can wear pretty clothes."

"Is it true the streets are so brightly lit you can read in them at night?"

"Yes. All through the night. . . . And all along the Bosphorus there are places where you can sit listening to Turkish music while you drink Raki and eat all sorts of marvellous things. And you watch the caiques slowly sailing by. . . ."

What else did he talk about? Sonia slept. It was the first time he had seen her asleep and he bent over her to study her. Her face was once again pale and clear-cut. Why had that little face tortured him so much? And why had they wasted so many months rubbing each other up the wrong way when everything was really so simple? By the door he had said to her:

"We'll go away together, Sonia."

And she had answered with a squeeze of her hand. What did it matter if the rain poured down incessantly into the black street? Soon they would see that street no more. From time to time the window opposite opened again, for Koline, who couldn't sleep, to lean over the sill for a while before rejoining his wife in bed.

The first time Sonia opened her eyes, she stared at Adil Bey for some seconds before picking up the thread again. Then she murmured:

"Aren't you going to sleep?"

"Presently."

"Is it true you were so jealous of me?"

"Jealous to the point of hating everybody who came in contact with you, even that brother of yours with his calm airs and his way of leaning out over the window-sill."

"He works very hard."

"Does he believe in what he's doing?"

"He tries to. But a thing of that sort is never spoken about, even between brother and sister or husband and wife. It's a thing you don't discuss even with yourself."

And, suddenly changing the subject:

"Are there lots of trams in Istanbul?"

"In the big streets, one goes by every half minute."

She smiled incredulously.

"Have you got many friends there?"

"I had, but I shan't be seeing them again."

"Why not?"

"Because you'd be jealous of them just as I've been jealous of your club and even the picture of Stalin on the wall!"

He was sure she would be. He had no misgivings now. The rain came down, and it was wonderful to think of the bleak wetness outside and feel secure there, sheltered from everything and everybody.

They were both asleep when someone knocked twice on the door. Their two heads were raised simultaneously. They mustn't answer, mustn't make a sound. The unknown person knocked again, then tried the handle.

Would he try to force the lock. Adil Bey pressed Sonia to him and, when the steps finally moved off, he looked at her, heaving a deep sigh.

"I was scared," she said.

Indeed, her body was moist with perspiration. Adil Bey caressed it. It was the first time he had held her in his arms. Yes, the first time! The other times didn't count. He had already banished them from his memory.

"Come on. . . . Let's go to sleep again."

She had a strange way of coiling herself up in bed, with her head snuggled down on to her shoulder.

Then came the grey light of morning, almost unrecognisable because of the paper on the window. The house began to come to life. They could hear people washing on the landing.

Adil Bey had been awake for some minutes when he realised Sonia's eyes were open. She still looked tired.

"How wonderful it would be," she sighed.

"What?"

"To live somewhere else. In Istanbul. Anywhere. Like the photograph."

He didn't get the sense of her remark for a moment, confused by

the idea she might be jealous of the girl in the car. Then he corrected her.

"It *will* be wonderful."

"Yes. It *will* be. But how are you going to set about it?"

"I don't know yet, but I'll find a way all right."

He almost blurted out that it would have been easier if she hadn't had the very man shot who could have given them professional aid. He just stopped himself in time. It was better not to talk about it. Not that he bore Sonia a grudge. He now considered it quite natural for her to have acted as she did.

"Leave me to get dressed."

On previous occasions she had dressed in front of him. This time she made him wait in the office, where he paced up and down in his pyjamas. With the upmost satisfaction, he contemplated the broken ink-pot and the papers scattered on the floor. He stretched, yawned lazily, and smiled as he saw Nadia Koline through the fringe of a muslin curtain, brushing her long hair.

He heard Sonia moving about, and tried to guess exactly what she was doing. When she finally appeared, he was touched by the sight of her as he had rarely been touched in his life, though she stood in the doorway, in her black dress and hat, exactly as he had always seen her.

"It's a pity I have to go," she said, looking worried.

"Why should you?"

"I must."

"Suppose we started off by getting married here in Russia."

The idea had just flashed into his mind.

"That wouldn't simplify things at all. To the authorities here, I'd still be a Russian, and they wouldn't let me go."

"What are you going to do now?"

"Try and sneak out without being seen. I'll have my breakfast over the way and come back as usual at nine."

He had quite forgotten there was a morning's work ahead of them. He looked again at the papers, which seemed now to be of no significance whatever.

"I'll see what I can do about arranging a passage. Meanwhile you're quite right—the work here had better go on just the same."

It was only now that he realised that, though they'd talked a lot, they had made no plans at all—not practical ones.

"I'll be going now."

She walked briskly towards the door, and suddenly without reason, he was seized by fear. He dashed forward and grasped her hand.

"Sonia!" he said as poignantly as he had the previous night.

"Yes? . . . I'll be back at nine."

"I know. . . . But . . ."

He wouldn't let go of her hand. He couldn't bear the thought of her going.

"Why not stay?"

"It's quite impossible."

She glanced at the house opposite. The next moment she had disengaged her hand and escaped. At the door she turned to give him a smile.

"At nine o'clock!"

Adil Bey dawdled over his shaving. He could hear the charwoman moving about in the next room clearing up the mess, but he had no thought for her.

When at last he went into the office, fully dressed, she was holding Sonia's bag in her hand.

"Your secretary's left this," she said.

"Thanks. She'll be coming soon."

As for him, he thought it wisest to get out of the place before people began to arrive. He had a vague plan in his mind. At least, he knew what he was going to do first.

The air was quite cold. The rain was changing into a misty drizzle which made it almost impossible from the quay to see the water in the basin. From the entrance to the port came the scream of a ship's siren. In the streets people walked quickly.

Adil Bey went into the red brick building which housed the offices of the *Standard*. Several people were employed there, only John being an American.

"Is Mr. John in?"

Even when called mister, John didn't seem to have a surname. Someone pointed to the ceiling, and Adil Bey went up to the first floor. There were several doors. He picked on one at random and knocked. A muffled voice answered, and he went in.

John was still in bed with the curtains drawn. In the half-light he recognised his visitor, sat up, rubbed his eyes, and ran his fingers through his hair.

"I've come to ask you to help me. It's most urgent," said Adil Bey in a single breath.

The American drank a large glass of mineral water.

"It's become absolutely necessary to get a person out of the country at once. Naturally, she has no passport."

"The little girl?" asked John placidly.

"Which little girl?"

"Your little mouse of a secretary."

"Yes. It's her. But I must ask you to keep it absolutely secret. You know what she risks."

"A bullet in her guts. Yes, I know . . . I'll see what I can do. There's a Belgian skipper here at the moment whom I know pretty well. Come back and see me this afternoon."

John got out of bed and drew back the curtains. He spoke in a dull voice, looking churlishly round him.

"This afternoon? Couldn't it be sooner?"

"Look here, Adil Bey. . . . Are you quite sure that child really wants to get away. I don't care two hoots about her, but I do care about my Belgian friend, who might get into a very nasty jam."

"I can answer for Sonia."

"Of course you can!"

"What do you mean?"

"Only that I can see some fair hairs clinging to your jacket collar!"

He took his shower-bath and started dressing, surly, yet quite unruffled.

"I warned you."

"Of what?"

"I told you to keep your mouth shut and not get mixed up in anything. What you're doing now is extremely foolish. If you want to clear out, you'd much better go alone. Still, that's your affair."

By way of breakfast, he swilled his mouth out with whisky.

"You're right about one thing, however. We'd better get cracking straight away. You're in the mood to commit every conceivable folly, and if I left you to your own devices I feel sure you'd manage to get yourself arrested. . . . Where's my jacket? . . . By the way the Pendellis gave me a message for you. You know—the usual sort of nonsense. . . . At the present moment they'll be steaming along the coast of Trebizond. . . . Right! Are you coming?"

They plunged into the wet, after John had cast a baleful look into his office. There was a smell of oil hanging over this part of the harbour. Every fifty yards they came to a sentry, who saluted the American.

"Is it that ship?"

"No. The one astern. She'll have finished loading this evening, and will no doubt sail sometime during the night. They've got a cabin for passengers. Have you got a pass?"

"What for?"

"To get into the docks and go on board the ships."

"No."

"Wait here, then."

John went and spoke to some men in uniform. Adil Bey thought he saw him handing out some cigars.

"That's all right," he said as he rejoined Adil Bey. "Only we mustn't be more than half an hour, as they change guards then."

The captain's quarters were high up in the superstructure. They found him in his cabin writing letters. John dropped into a chair, saying:

"This is the Turkish consul. He seems anxious to tie a stone round his neck. Tell him frankly what you can do for him."

The ship was immersed in the drizzle. The steel partitions were

covered with beads of moisture. The captain listened, scratching his neck and shooting keen glances at Adil Bey.

"He's been bowled over by a little Russian girl, and wants to smuggle her out of the country."

"Is it possible?" put in Adil Bey eagerly.

"Anything's possible," sighed the captain. "But it's troublesome."

"Why?"

"You think it's simple, do you, to get people on board a ship without anyone noticing and hide them from the police when they come aboard to inspect the ship?"

"Have you done it already?"

"Of course I have. But that doesn't mean it's easy."

He got up and opened a cupboard in which hung some uniform suits, a couple of overcoats, and an oilskin.

"There! The thing is to prevent them seeing the feet underneath."

"How do you manage that?"

"The chap has to be hung up too, like the clothes, with his feet eighteen inches off the deck. The Russians never touch the clothes. They just have a look underneath."

"And if they did make a thorough search?"

The captain shrugged his shoulders.

"How long does it last?"

"The inspection? You never know. She might be there for hours. Last time, they were nosing round the ship from noon till nine o'clock in the evening."

"There's enough air to breathe?"

Adil Bey knew the others were bored by his fussiness. But how could he help asking a question like that?

"I take it the young lady in question is capable of keeping still?"

"I can answer for her."

John, who had taken a bottle of beer from another cupboard, looked at him with a sort of gentle pity.

"That's what they always say."

"I assure you. . . . She's not an ordinary girl at all."

"Of course not! Have a glass of beer. It's real Pilsener."

Adil Bey didn't care whether it was Pilsener or anything else. He couldn't rest till everything was fixed up.

"I suppose you're stopping at Istanbul?"

"We stop for an hour in the roads, but we can't disembark anybody there. It's not a port of call for us."

"Where can we disembark?"

"At Antwerp. We'll be there in three weeks."

Never mind. If it had been San Francisco, Adil Bey would still have said yes.

"All right? . . . If your own papers are in order, you can come on board openly and take the passenger's cabin. It's alongside."

"And how's she to come on board?"

"That's up to her. Can she swim?"

Adil Bey wasn't sure. All he knew was she often went to bathe. He decided to chance it.

"Yes," he said positively.

"In that case she can come that way. When it's quite dark she can slip into the water on the other side of the harbour. And she mustn't splash. We'll have a net hanging down on the port side. She must hang on to it and keep quiet till we see her. Then we'll hoist her on board. But she must keep absolutely quiet. If they hear a sound, they'll start shooting."

"This evening, then," said Adil Bey, getting up.

He was in such a hurry to break the news to Sonia that he forgot even to thank the skipper. John walked back with him to the town.

"Do you think it's very dangerous?"

"It's dangerous."

"What do you put the chances at?"

He wanted to know exactly. John, however, merely stared into the distance.

"Shall I see you on board?"

"I don't know."

Why did everybody in the street seem so completely indifferent? He would have liked to shake them, to shout at them:

"Can't you understand what's going on? Something of the gravest importance! A matter of life and death!

They didn't know! They went about blindly, thinking about their own petty affairs!

Near the entrance to the refineries John took leave of him with a few words of advice.

"You'd better keep out of sight as much as possible to-day. In the state you're in at present, you'd only arouse suspicion. If there's any hitch, you can always get hold of me. I'll be at the office all day, and then in the bar from ten o'clock onwards."

Adil Bey hurried breathlessly through the drizzle, which covered his coat with fine drops. The quay seemed interminable. He felt he would never reach home. He dreaded the thought of the day that lay ahead of him, which would doubtless be the longest of his whole life. He had practically nothing to do. Only to pack a few things and get an exit visa. They couldn't refuse him one. He'd say he had to go back to Turkey immediately to consult a specialist.

As for Sonia, she wouldn't be able to take anything with her. He might have packed some things for her, but it was wiser to avoid all complications. The only thing that mattered was to get her out of the country. Clothes didn't count. Only when the ship was under way would he be able to breathe again.

He rushed upstairs, pausing for a moment at the door, hardly daring to go in.

"Sonia!"

She wasn't in the office. On the chairs people were waiting as usual. The first arrival immediately got to his feet and came forward with some papers in his hand.

Adil Bey took no notice of him, but dashed straight through to the bedroom where the charwoman was making his bed.

"My secretary?"

"She hasn't arrived yet."

It was nearly eleven. She had promised to be there at nine.

He stood stock still in the middle of the room. Then slowly he turned to look at the window opposite. It was shut. All he could see through the black panes was a fringe of muslin curtain.

XI

The time dragged on, and the sky remained obdurately glum. Noon was like a bleak grey dawn prophesying disaster, evoking vision of trains sprawling helplessly on railway embankments or hideous crimes discovered in the early morning in squalid tenements.

Adil Bey left the house opposite no wiser than before. He had been up to the first floor and knocked on the Kolines' door, as scared of its opening as of there being no one there. There had been no answer. Now he wandered down the street, racked by apprehensions, looking round occasionally to see if he was being followed.

"I'll talk about my visa first, then try and worm some information out of them. . . ."

The big building which he had so often visited with Sonia was as usual full of people waiting—a damp, steamy humanity. As a regular and a privileged visitor, Adil Bey went straight to the door of the aliens' department and opened it. The man with the shaven head was sitting in his place. Opposite him was a visitor. Adil Bey was hesitating, wondering whether to go in or not, when a sign was made to him to wait outside.

Such a thing had never happened before. Never. He had to stand in the corridor among the people squatting on the floor, with nothing to do but count the minutes. A quarter of an hour later he was still there, his nerves stretched to breaking point. Indeed he was on the point of bursting in again, when the door opened. The visitor left. As the official waved Adil Bey to the empty chair, he looked at him with more than a suspicion of a smile.

This time the consul had no interpreter. He put his passport

down on the table and explained in halting Russian that he wanted a visa.

He expected the other to be surprised and even to ask a lot of questions. The Russian merely sipped his tea, however, and read every page of the passport from cover to cover. Then he reached for a rubber stamp and banged it down on the last page.

That settled one thing—Adil Bey's departure was assured, and he hastily stuffed the passport into his pocket with something like satisfaction. To speak about Sonia was more difficult. He blushed, he stammered, and got into such a muddle that his words didn't make any sense at all. He apologized. If he might be excused for raising such a question, he'd like to know. . . . He wasn't sure. . . . It might be that she had only . . .

"*Sprechen Sie Deutsch?*" asked the official suddenly after a close scrutiny of his visitor.

"*Ja wohl.*"

Why hadn't the man said before that he understood German? For months Sonia had had to translate everything word for word, when all the time they had a language in common.

Now that he could speak German, Adil Bey became voluble at once. He explained that his secretary hadn't put in an appearance that morning, that it was absolutely necessary to get hold of her, that . . .

"Are you going away, or aren't you?"

"Yes. I'm going all right. . . . Only . . ."

"Let me put it differently. Do you want me to find you another secretary to start work to-morrow morning?"

"I merely want to know what's happened to my existing one. I'm a consul. And according to the rules of international courtesy . . ."

He pulled himself up. Perhaps he was going too far. The official smiled back at him and spread out his hands in a gesture of helplessness.

"What do you expect me to do? If you told me some documents had been stolen it would be a different matter. As it is . . . Perhaps

your secretary has some reasons of her own for leaving you. That doesn't come within my province at all."

"Who's province is it then? Take me to see someone else."

The Russian got up and left the room. It was a quarter of an hour before he appeared again and Adil Bey bit his nails with exasperation. Now and again, as though to comfort himself, he felt the passport in his pocket.

Supposing Sonia had turned up at the office after all? Hadn't he been rather premature in making all this fuss? The woman who sat behind him was all the time busy totting up figures with the aid of her abacus.

At last the official returned, his face betraying nothing.

"Comrade Rabinovitch will see you in a few minutes. And now, if you'll excuse me . . ."

He buried himself in his papers, sometimes signing his name. Another glass of tea was brought him. He offered one to Adil Bey, who, however, refused. Finally he got up, glanced out of the window, and, lighting a cigarette, said:

"If you'll come this way. . . ."

Why at that particular moment? No bell had rung. He hadn't looked at the clock. So they'd made Adil Bey wait just for the sake of waiting.

Sitting all alone in the next room was a little Jew with a goatee beard and steel-rimmed glasses, whose nails were as black as those of his colleague of the alien's department.

"Would you rather speak French?" he asked.

Till that day Adil Bey had been encouraged to believe that nobody in the whole of that building could speak anything but Russian. He was making discoveries. Still, he had no time to think about that. He began his story over again.

"I would like to know what's become of my secretary, who's been missing since nine o'clock this morning."

"Why do you want to know?"

The man's spectacles magnified his eyes enormously giving them an expression of childlike artlessness.

"Because . . . Well, she's my secretary. . . . And naturally I . . ."

"I am told you're leaving to-night or to-morrow."

"As a matter of fact . . ."

"You mean you're not going after all?"

The big candid eyes stared at him. Adil Bey was terrified.

"I am going," he declared.

"In that case you won't be needing a secretary, will you? . . . Unless, of course, you want to take her with you. Only, in that case you must say so."

"I assure you. . . . There's no question of such a thing."

"Then everything's perfectly all right, isn't it? . . . Is there anything else I can do for you?"

They knew! Obviously they knew! The man who had brought him there had remained by the door listening to the interview, in spite of its being in French.

"By the way, what ship are you taking?"

"I don't know yet."

"I trust we shall have the pleasure of seeing you back in Batum before long."

It was the inordinate simplicity of those eyes which terrified him. They seemed to him more like an animal's eyes.

Comrade Rabinovitch in front of him, the man with the shaven head by the door. . . . And now, turning round, Adil Bey discovered a third person who had been listening to the conversation. For a moment the wild idea crossed his mind that he was encircled, that they weren't going to let him go.

"Good day, gentlemen. . . ."

"A pleasant journey. . . ."

They did let him go. But nobody came with him into the other room to show him out. They all stayed behind, obviously to discuss him.

On the stairs, he elbowed his way through a crowd of people, but nobody seemed to mind being pushed out of the way. Outside, he turned towards the consulate and walked there as quickly as he could. He hadn't yet abandoned the idea that Sonia might turn up

after all. There was no sign of her, however, and the window opposite was still shut. He felt the same aching frustration one experiences in dreams when one tries in vain to catch a train.

If he did find Sonia, what then? Had he spoilt everything by his clumsy attempts to find out about her?

One thing was quite clear to him: he couldn't stay in Batum. Not after his interview with Rabinovitch. There was really no reason why he should feel like that. He had done nothing wrong. All the same, he had the conviction that somehow or other he had burned his boats.

What was he to do now? There were hours ahead of him before he could go on board the ship. He must do something.

Once again he was striding through the streets, splashing through the puddles. At the offices of the *Standard* he asked:

"Is Mr. John in?"

"He's upstairs, having his lunch."

He had never seen over John's flat, and he was surprised to find him in a comfortable, well furnished room, being waited on by a manservant in a white jacket. It was only John himself, with his sleeves rolled up who didn't quite fit into the picture.

He looked vaguely at his visitor, and asked casually:

"How are you, old boy?"

"Sonia's gone."

John turned to the manservant.

"Lay another place."

"I'm not hungry. And I'm in a hurry. . . ."

"Sit down."

"I must find out what's become of her. I may as well tell you she spent the night at my place. She went off to have her breakfast over the way, saying she'd be back at nine. I tried to find out something when I got my visa but I found their manner very queer—sneering and a bit menacing. . . ."

Adil Bey rattled on at top speed, while John went on munching. Finally the latter got to his feet, with his mouth full, and led Adil Bey to the window to show him an unpaved courtyard surrounded

by brick buildings and then by a wall crowned by three lines of barbed wire.

"What is it?"

There was no one about. The buildings seemed deserted. Adil Bey didn't understand at once. Then he remembered the man who smuggled people across the frontier.

"It's there that they . . ."

He was overcome, but not in the way he would have expected to be. All his comings and goings that morning had had Sonia for their focal point. It was only for her that he was acting as he was. Yet now, as he gazed at the black earth of the sinister courtyard, he was unable, try as he would, to visualize her. Her features remained vague and elusive as though she was far, far away from him.

"They couldn't have shot her, could they?"

"I haven't heard any shots this morning. You see that building there? . . . No the smaller one on the left. That's where they do it."

It was a grim picture in a crude, cruel light, like some of those pictures you see in newspapers. Adil Bey was reminded of a photograph he'd taken himself during the war. It was of a shell crater, and in the foreground two big black boots were all that was visible of a corpse.

"What can we do?"

"Finish our lunch."

John went back to the table, but he didn't sit down, and after filling his mouth with cold meat he went over to the telephone. The number he asked for was one Adil Bey didn't know. Nor did he know till he heard him talking that John spoke Russian fluently without the slightest effort.

He had never said anything about being able to speak Russian. He spoke much too quickly for Adil Bey to follow, but the latter could guess, more from the manner than the words, what he was talking about. At first he was merely exchanging politenesses. As he listened to the man at the other end of the line, he searched for the whisky bottle and poured himself out a drink. Little by little he became graver, sometimes nodding his head and saying:

"Yes . . . Yes . . . *Da . . . Da . . .*"

When he rang off he drained his glass with unaccustomed slowness.

"Who have you been talking to?"

"To the head of the *Ogpu* here, the top dog of all."

"What's he say?"

"Get on with your lunch. . . . He first of all tried to head me off, but I insisted on his telling me the truth."

"Well?"

"The best thing you can do is to get away in that ship to-night."

"Then they've killed her!"

"I don't think so. I didn't see any goings-on in the courtyard this morning."

"Tell me, John, frankly—is there anything I can do? There's nothing I wouldn't do for her."

He was sweating all over. John's only answer was to pour him out a full glass of whisky and hand it him with:

"Drink that."

"I can't just leave her to her fate. I may as well tell you she's been my mistress for months."

"Drink it up."

John went on eating, his elbows on the table, his eyes apparently studying the pattern in the table-cloth.

"It would be cowardly to go off without her. You must understand that. Unless of course I was sure. . . ."

He kept on coming back to it, saying the same thing in different words. Without realising it, he had, however, started to eat. Was John listening? Whether he was or not, Adil Bey talked on. For months he'd been learning to keep his mouth shut. Now he let go.

"The trouble is I don't know whom to turn to."

John lit a cigar, filled his guest's glass again, and leant back in his chair. It was not till Adil Bey had talked himself out and turned to him with beseeching eyes that he finally said:

"Now look here! . . . This is what you're going to do. You're going to pack up all your things and have your trunks taken down

to the ship. See them through the customs yourself. The ship sails some time in the middle of the night. Meet me in the bar at ten. I shall be there with the skipper. I'll tell you then what I've been able to find out."

"You think you'll know something by then?"

"I don't think anything. I'll simply do what I can."

"But what can you do?"

"Don't bother your head about that."

And he pushed over the box of cigars.

When Adil Bey saw the lights of the bar through the misty drizzle, he slackened his pace, like a swimmer who eases up as he nears the life-buoy.

He was at the end of his tether. For hours he had been floundering about, with feverish impatience, in a town in which he was all alone and in which his liberty perhaps even his life—was no longer assured. There was no doubt about it. John had as good as admitted it. Adil Bey was no longer safe.

Not only had Sonia failed to reappear, but the charwoman hadn't come back in the afternoon either. The window opposite had remained closed all day.

He appeared to be ringed by a sort of moat of emptiness and silence. For instance, he had searched the streets for a porter, accosting anyone who seemed at all likely. No one had so much as answered him!

He had had to lug his trunks down the stairs himself. Plenty of people passed and saw him struggling with them, but no one thought of lending him a hand.

When at last his things were piled on the pavement, he was at a loss to know what to do next. There were no taxis. It was as though he was in a vacuum. They were surrounding him with it. They wanted to suffocate him with it. He remembered having seen an abandoned barrow the day before. He went and fetched it, and it was he, Adil Bey, the Turkish consul who had to wheel his luggage all the way to the ship.

He was determined not to leave his things behind. Still more determined to be clear of Russia before another day dawned.

It was wheeling his barrow that he once again passed in front of the little bronze Lenin and then the big house of the clubs and trade unions, where no one was visible. He tried to picture Sonia, as he had seen her, sitting in the window, but once again the image was blurred. He had too much to do, too much to think about.

At the customs he was passed from one officer to another, each being as unhelpful as the last. Again no one lifted a finger to help him with a trunk.

He would have liked to stay on board the ship rather than wander through the wet and hostile streets. But he thought it wisest to return the barrow to where he'd found it. If he didn't, couldn't they make that a pretext for arresting him?

Now his struggles were over. He went through the doorway, to be plunged at once into another atmosphere, one of music and soft lights. Someone took his hat and coat. At one of the tables three people were waiting for him. Between John and the Belgian captain was a woman whose back was turned. It was Nejla!

"Whisky?" asked John.

And to forestall any awkward questions he added at once:

"I haven't found out anything since I last saw you."

The clock on the wall behind the band showed ten o'clock. Nejla was obviously jumpy, though she covered it as best she could with a rather forced gaiety.

"I hear you're leaving Batum?" she said, turning to Adil Bey.

"I'm not sure yet. . . ."

"Go on! Your baggage is already on board."

She winked at the captain, then at John. The latter got up and made for the lavatory, making Adil Bey a sign to follow.

"You're sure there's nothing to be done?" asked the consul as soon as they were alone.

"Absolutely nothing."

"Nor to-morrow?"

"Nor to-morrow nor any other day."

"How do you know?"

"The van came this afternoon."

"What van?"

He didn't grasp it at once, though he could see from John's manner the news was bad.

"The one made of sheet iron with little holes in it for ventilation."

Adil Bey had seen it two or three times. Its appearance always indicated there was a corpse to be disposed of.

"When that van arrives and drives into the courtyard . . . Hold tight, old boy!"

John patted him gently on the back. Adil Bey stood motionless. No tears came. Perhaps all he felt was a cold sensation between his shoulder-blades.

"You're sure it was for her?"

His voice was normal and the look in his eyes was firmer than it had been all day.

"Come on. They'll be wondering what we're up to."

John went back to his place, but he kept Adil Bey under observation. The latter interrupted the captain's lively conversation with Nejla to ask:

"When do we sail?"

"About one. You must be on board not later than twelve."

Twelve. That seemed a long way off. John watched Adil Bey's eyes darting from one person to another and then to the curtain by the door.

"Drink up your whisky. It'll do you good."

"You think so?"

Nejla was also studying Adil Bey, and not without a certain anxiety. With her foot she attracted the captain's attention to whisper to him:

"Has he been told?"

"Not yet."

They were to sail at one. That left them plenty of time, and if they had shot Sonia, whose brother was high up in the *Ogpu*, was there any reason why they shouldn't also . . .

"By the way . . ." murmured the captain in a very low voice, leaning over to Adil Bey.

He was obviously embarrassed, though his flaming cheeks told he had been drinking freely. Adil Bey noticed he was holding Nejla's arm.

"Since a certain person is unable to come with us, and since we've got everything ready . . ."

He glanced round to make sure they couldn't be overheard. John was drumming with his fingers on the table in time with the music.

" . . . I've decided to take this lady in her place . . . I think it would be just as well if we went on board now. . . . She'll be joining us in half an hour. . . . Waiter!"

He wanted the bill, but John stopped him, saying in Russian to the waiter:

"Put this down to me."

The drizzle had stopped. The usual women were gathered outside, but they didn't bestow so much as a smile on any of the three men. John's hand was on Adil Bey's shoulder. They dragged their feet through the thick mud on the quays and as they approached the ships they were greeted by the smell of oil.

The harbour police hadn't yet visited the ship. Adil Bey heard someone say so when they went on board. He followed the captain, who led him to his cabin where he left him alone with John.

"You feel better here, don't you?" said the latter.

Adil Bey nodded. Obediently he drank the glass of beer that was poured out for him. For a moment he wondered what the captain was doing, but his mind soon drifted on to something else.

A little later there were steps outside. The door opened. Nejla came in dripping water all over the place, her clothes clinging to her body.

"There's the bathroom. You can take your clothes off in there."

Everything seemed to be happening as in a film, a silent film without music. Adil Bey seemed to be watching it all from a distance. Only, when he felt John's eyes on him, he tried to smile, as though to reassure him.

It was all over—and yet it wasn't. It seemed to be over, but until the police had been nothing was really settled.

When the captain brought Nejla in again, she was wearing a dressing-gown of his. She was put into the cupboard and hoisted into position.

The mate dashed in to say:

"They're coming."

Why was it Adil Bey couldn't remember a single one of Sonia's expressions? He could picture her slim black figure, her thin white neck and her hat, but the face was practically a blank.

In the officers' saloon, three men in green caps sat at the table. They too had been provided with glasses of beer. On the table was the crew list and a pile of passports, while the thirty-two members of the crew were lined up round the walls.

The men's names were read out like an army roll-call. It was Koline who opened each passport, found the photograph inside, and studied the man who came forward.

"Peeters . . ."

"Here!"

Koline did his job slowly and thoroughly. Adil Bey, who was at the end of the line couldn't take his eyes off a bit of black ribbon about an inch wide which went round the lapel of his coat, threaded through the buttonhole.

"Van Rompen . . ."

"Here!"

Each had his passport returned to him.

"Nielsen . . ."

"Here!"

"Adil Zeki Bey."

There was no answer for a moment and Koline looked up into the consul's haggard face. Still the latter couldn't answer. He couldn't breathe. He couldn't move. All he could do was to stare fixedly at that bit of black ribbon.

"Captain Cauwelaert . . ."

"Here!"

It was over. Adil Bey had been given his passport. His fingers had almost touched Koline's, yet nothing had happened! Next came the inspection. Koline and the officers went out while the crew remained in the saloon. Some of them sat down. One finished off a half-emptied bottle of beer.

"Well! That's over, at any rate," sighed John, looking hard at Adil Bey.

The latter smiled painfully. With an effort he managed to say:

"Yes. Did you see the black ribbon?"

"And his eyes too. In his place I'd have killed you. . . ."

And by the way he spoke it seemed as though John had guessed everything—the window over the way, Koline leaning out in the dark smoking his cigarette, the grey paper that Adil Bey had pasted on his own windows, and the Russian looking up and down the street watching for his sister . . .

"I must be off now. . . . Good luck!"

"Will you be staying much longer in Batum yourself?"

John gave him a look, one of his own peculiar looks, indolent yet shrewd.

"For ever, most likely."

"Why?"

The door was open. They could see the wet quay on the other side of the basin, the lights of the bar, the dark blocks of buildings behind which was that network of squalid little streets they both knew.

And John answered simply:

"Habit, I suppose. . . . Good-bye."

Koline and his men were already going down the gangway. Koline had a brief-case tucked under his arm. The skipper having seen them over the side, turned and winked at Adil Bey.

Then the whole ship seemed to come to life. Men ran hither and thither. Orders were shouted. Hawasers were slipped. On the fore-castle they were working cables.

When he got home, would Koline lean out of the window once again and stare at the blank windows opposite?

Adil Bey remained on deck leaning over the bulwarks, watching the receding quay as the ship hauled out into the basin. Lights slowly swung aft as the ship slewed round. Sometimes a deckhand ran past. The engine-room telegraph rang, and the engines began turning.

Was it a drizzle or merely a wet mist? Certainly everything was covered with moisture, his face, the deck, everything he touched. The throb of the engines increased.

They passed close to a green light, then a red one. A long blast was sounded on the siren as the ship gathered way, followed by another and finally a third.

Batum was soon out of sight. After rounding a headland, they altered course to port. It was too misty to see anything ahead, but Adil Bey knew that on the port bow were the mountains of Asia Minor.

"The captain says: would you come to his cabin?"

The steward moved off. Adil Bey went up a ladder and heard the sound of voices.

"Come in."

Bright lights. Nejla, in pink pyjamas, going off into peals of laughter. She was changing the needle of the gramophone. The captain had unbuttoned his jacket. The steward brought champagne.

"I thought you might like to have a glass with us. . . ."

The gramophone wailed out a tango they played every night at the bar, Nejla singing snatches from time to time or going through the movements of the dance. Her eyes shone as she looked at the two men.

Then she sat on the arm of Cauwelaert's chair.

More champagne. Nejla couldn't stop laughing. She kissed the captain and she kissed Adil Bey. She insisted on his dancing.

Sometimes, as she made up to the captain, she winked at Adil Bey. And sometimes a button of her pyjama jacket would come undone and she wouldn't notice it for a moment.

A steady vibration went through the ship. She hardly rolled at all, yet Adil Bey was feeling queasy.

He was still trying to picture Sonia, still unable to get any further than a black dress, a hat, a white neck . . .

The skipper was enjoying himself hugely. It was very late indeed when he said at last:

“Come on. We must turn in.”

He shook Adil Bey's clammy hand. Nejla stayed behind. When the door was shut Adil Bey heard another peal of laughter. Curtains were drawn across the portholes.

Adil Bey was really feeling sick. He went back to the bulwarks, leant over the side and vomited his guts out.

The superstructure was a milky white. All the rest of the ship was black.

What would the minister say to him! Any doctor could vouch for the fact that he was suffering from the effects of arsenic. And John, who really knew the country, had strongly advised him to clear out.

Besides he had a good record. He had fought at the Dardanelles and then again for Mustapha Kemal. He had always upheld the honour of his country, even when it meant quarrelling with the Pendellis.

When Adil Bey finally went to his cabin he could still hear laughter from the captain's quarters. He switched on the light, then automatically glanced towards the porthole as though to make sure there was no window over the way.

II

THE GENDARME'S REPORT

Translated from the French

Le Rapport du Gendarme

THE two women were in the loft over the front part of the house, the one that had been fitted out as an apple loft, and which had a small round window looking down onto the road. Sitting on a low chair, the mother, Joséphine Roy, was taking apples one by one from a basket, wiping them with a red check duster, throwing the maggoty ones away, and handing the good ones to Lucile.

Lucile's job was to place them carefully, so that none of them touched, on the slatted shelves that ran round the walls. For the top shelves, she had to use a step-ladder.

They had started as soon as the washing-up was done, and it was now after four. Their movements were so regular that they could have served to measure the passage of time, and the silence around them was so complete that anyone watching them could easily have persuaded himself he could sense the beating of their pulses, just as on entering the kitchen below one was immediately conscious of the heart-beat of the big old-fashioned clock.

The rain, too, was silent. It fell as the darkness fell, slowly, steadily, and peacefully, like an endlessly moving curtain of fine gauze.

All of which was to be described a few hours later in the dry, official language of the gendarme's report.

For hours Joséphine Roy had been wiping apples, inspecting them, and eliminating the bad ones. For hours her daughter had been arranging them on the shelves, each sort in a separate place.

And every time Lucile passed the little round window—or at any rate almost every time, for you really can't be sure about a thing like that—she automatically glanced down at the stretch of road in front of the house, each time to be greeted by the same sight, the glistening road surface flanked by the vivid green grass verges, across one of which sprawled the big walnut tree that had been blown down the previous night, a pallid trunk with helpless writhing arms.

The autumn gale which had lashed the house all night had dropped with the first signs of daybreak to give place to this seemingly everlasting drizzle. First thing in the morning Etienne Roy

with his father, Joséphine and Lucile had stood in the road contemplating the catastrophe, which is hardly too strong a word to use for the downfall of a tree that had stood for some two hundred years and given the farm its name, *Gros-Noyer*.

Two branches which were blocking the road had had to be sawn off then and there.

The old man would now no doubt be in the stable or the cowshed seeing to the animals. His son, Etienne, had gone to Fontenay-le-Comte, as he did every Saturday.

In half an hour, or perhaps even before that, the women would have to go down, for the light was already failing and it would soon be impossible to tell the good apples from the bad ones.

Fixing the exact times was going to be the gendarme's job, and the remarkable thing was that, by dint of endless questioning and cross-questioning, he was going to get them right almost to the minute.

The first person to go along the road was Serre, the horse-dealer of La Rochelle who drove past in his car with his horse-box in tow. Lucile bent down to look. She didn't see Serre himself, but she saw the horse, soaked with rain, unsteady on his legs in the jolting trailer. She noticed that the car slowed down slightly when passing the house, no doubt because the driver was interested in the fallen tree.

That was at half-past four. There had been no difficulty in fixing that, as Serre had left the *Café du Maronnier* at Maillezais just after the quarter, and, towing as he was, would have taken nearly fifteen minutes to do the five kilometres.

One more row of apples, thirty in the row. How many minutes or seconds would that take? . . . The end of the shelf was quite close to the window, and glancing down once again, Lucile frowned, for there was now a human form stretched out by the fallen walnut tree.

She didn't say anything. She rarely spoke to her mother.

"I thought it might be a drunken man," she stated later. "Quite often on Saturdays people come back from the fair with a skinful. . . ."

All the same, the sight of the prostrate figure had given her a little shock. She fetched another basket of apples and set it down by her mother's chair then returned once more to glance out of the window. This time she noticed a bicycle lying near the man.

A drunken man? Perhaps. But there was certainly something about the spectacle which made a disagreeable impression on Lucile. If any proof of that were needed, it was provided by the fact that her mind at once reverted to the cat. It was an old story, dating back ten years, when Lucile was a girl of twelve.

Back from school, she sat in the kitchen doing her homework. Her mother was busy peeling vegetables and the evening closed in just as it did on that day ten years later.

A ginger cat had been wandering round *Gros-Noyer* for the past few days and all attempts to chase it away with hay-forks had been in vain. Suddenly with a wild cry it had jumped up onto the window-sill outside. They could see it quite close through the window, and it in turn gazed terror-struck at the faces on the other side of the glass.

It had been caught in a trap and had only disengaged itself at the cost of horrid wounds which had become infested. Flies with green and gold wings were crawling all over them.

"Go back to your work, Lucile. . . ."

Her mother went out and tried to chase the animal away, but it remained huddled close to the window and nothing would dislodge it. Lucile's grandfather had gone over to Saint-Odile for a glass of wine. His son was at the fair.

They had to wait an hour. It was quite dark, but the light inside glowed back at them from the creature's eyes. At last the cart drew up outside.

"Etienne. The cat's here."

Steps. A few dull thuds. A plaintive whine. Then Lucile's father came in.

"Wash your hands. . . ."

How many times had the girl's thoughts harked back to the cat?

How many times had she tried desperately to forget it? Sometimes it had even kept her awake at nights.

Three more rows of apples. A car passed. The headlamps were switched on, though it was still far from being dark. Lucile recognised Ligier's van, Ligier being a poultry-dealer at Saint-Odile. The van stopped. A head emerged. It looked as though the man was saying something, but if he was the words were drowned by the noise of the engine.

The next moment he drove on, making towards Saint-Odile.

As a matter of fact, Lucile was quite sure afterwards that she had caught sight of another person in the van. The one who put his head out was young Ligier. The other must have been his father, who often accompanied his son on a Saturday.

The unknown man was no longer lying in the same place. He was now on the edge of the road itself, almost touching one of the branches of the walnut tree.

Lucile opened her mouth to speak. But what was she to say? Not quite knowing, she said nothing.

Joséphine Roy stood up and shook her apron. There was no point in going on any longer, the light was really too bad. Besides it was time to put the soup on.

"Who's that?" she asked, looking out of the window.

"I don't know. . . . Ligier spoke to him. . . ."

They went downstairs together. From the first floor downwards the stairs were waxed and polished. Joséphine switched on the light in the huge kitchen.

It wasn't yet cold enough to light the kitchen stove, which stood to one side of an open hearth. In the latter a fire was already laid. Joséphine stooped down and struck a match, which burnt first with a small blue flame then with a yellow one, the first giving off a strong smell of sulphur. A moment later the brushwood was crackling on the hearth.

Lucile set to work preparing the meal for the hens, for on the farm there were jobs for each which never varied. While she worked, her mind continued to dwell on the man lying at the side of the road.

The clock struck five. It might have been a few minutes fast, but in any case not more than three or four. They heard the trot of a horse outside.

"Is the gate open?" asked Joséphine Roy.

Lucile drew back the curtain and looked out.

"Yes."

The mare stopped of her own accord. Etienne Roy got down from the *carriole* and shook himself like a wet dog. His wife opened the kitchen door. It was almost black outside in contrast to the light in the room.

"You didn't see anything on the road?"

"Where?"

"By the walnut tree. . . ."

Still holding his whip in his hand, Roy walked off. His wife stood in the doorway listening to his retreating steps, staring at the gate whose bars seemed to be drawn with Indian ink on a dark grey background.

The steps approached again. Roy said nothing till he reached the door. His breath smelt of drink as it did on every Saturday, though he was never drunk. Drops of rain beaded his ginger moustache.

With a worried expression in his eye, he peered into the kitchen as though he was looking for something or somebody.

"I suppose we'd better bring him in," he said. "I think he's . . ."

And he stared at his hand which was wet, not only with rain but with blood.

Saint-Odile was a large village, less than a quarter of a mile from *Gros-Noyer*, invisible, however, owing to a bend in the road and a clump of ash trees that obscured the church tower, which in any case wasn't very tall.

Leaving his old father to unharness the mare, Etienne Roy cycled to the post-office. Telephoning wasn't exactly in his line, so he asked the postmistress to do it for him.

"Hallo! . . . Is that Maillezais? Saint-Odile here. . . . Give me 6, will you? . . . Hallo! . . . Is that Dr. Naulet's? . . . Is the doctor

there? . . . He's out, you say? I suppose he's having his game of cards at the *Café du Commerce*. See if you can get hold of him, will you? He's wanted urgently. At Saint-Odile, yes. At *Gros-Noyer*. There's been an accident. . . ."

The next moment she had got back to the Maillezais exchange.

"Hallo! Give me the Gendarmerie. . . . *Oui, ma petite*. There's been an accident. A man found lying on the road more dead than alive. . . . Hallo! . . . *Gendarmerie?* . . . Saint-Odile here. . . ."

This was certainly in her line all right. She glanced at Roy, as much as to say:

"You see! It's quite simple! . . ."

By the time Etienne Roy left the post office darkness had fallen completely. Here and there a light shone from one of the square windows of the low houses. For a moment he forgot all about his bicycle and had to go back for it. Before returning to the farm, he called in at the village inn.

"A rum, please. . . ."

He studied his hand. Four card players studied him. If he told them, they'd all flock round to the farm and be a nuisance. He decided he'd better keep it to himself though he'd dearly have liked to talk.

"*Bonsoir*. . . ."

He was a guarded person. His approach to everything seemed to be so to speak in a sidelong sort of way, as though preparing to skirt some invisible obstacle. Some people said outright he wasn't straight, the truth being he was naturally suspicious, if not positively mistrustful.

Wouldn't it have been better to put the injured man into the *carriole* and drive him at once over to Maillezais? Instead of that, they had carried him upstairs and put him to bed in the front room, the one to which Etienne's mother had been confined during the last years of her life.

He walked, pushing his bicycle, for he was in no hurry. That ought to give the doctor and the gendarme time to arrive at the farm before he did. The gendarme could be counted on to cadge a lift in the doctor's car rather than cycle in the rain.

Who could it be, this man who had been found on the road in front of his house? Roy didn't know him. He didn't look like anybody of the locality, certainly not as regards his clothes, for he was wearing a pea-jacket of thick blue cloth which looked practically new. As for his features, it was impossible to get much impression of them on account of all the bruises and the blood.

At the farm, Roy suddenly thought of the man's bicycle. He went and fetched it from the side of the road and leant it, with his own, against the kitchen wall.

The old man was inside. He was in his sabots, which was an unusual thing. Generally, on coming in, he left them at the door, for the tiled floor of the kitchen was kept scrupulously clean. To an enquiring look from his son, the old man answered:

"No. I don't think he's pegged out yet. . . ."

Etienne stood still for a moment, wondering, listening. His wife and daughter were upstairs with the injured man. Taking advantage of their absence, he noiselessly opened a cupboard and took out a bottle of brandy.

He filled a glass and handed it to his father. Afterwards he filled it again for himself. That done, he washed it and put it and the bottle back.

A car. The yard at the side of the house suddenly bathed in the glare of headlamps, which, shining through the door of a shed, lit up the rump of a cow.

"Come in, doctor. . . . Come in, sergeant. . . . I thought you'd take advantage of the doctor's car. . . . A queer business, this. . . . Perhaps you'd better come straight up. . . ."

The stairs were already dirty as no one had thought of wiping their feet. Joséphine Roy opened the bedroom door quietly. Inside, the long-disused room had already come to life. There were towels, basins, jugs of water, a bottle of hydrogen peroxide that was one of the few stock medicaments of the house.

There were too many people in the room, in which the high mahogany bed looked more like a catafalque than a piece of household furniture.

"You'd better go now, Lucile."

The first thing the doctor said was:

"Put some water on to boil. . . . Lots of it. . . ."

The room smelt of moth-ball, for it was in the huge old-fashioned cupboard that unused clothes were put away beside the piles of sheets and pillow-cases. With his pipe still in his mouth, Dr. Naulet took off his jacket and rolled up his shirt-sleeves.

"Was it a car that knocked him down?"

"I don't know."

The man looked completely lifeless. He didn't react in the slightest when the doctor felt his skull.

"There are wheel marks on his trousers," observed the gendarme, who had already taken out his notebook. "Is he dead?"

"Not yet. . . . Look here, Sergeant. . . . Will you do something for me? . . . Ring up Dr. Berthomé of Fontenay and ask him to come. His number's 118. . . . Tell him to bring his things. . . ."

The house seemed all of sudden to have changed its character. For an hour its inhabitants went to and fro like shadows, feeling they didn't belong. The room that had for so long been quiet was now filled with bustle and with pharmaceutical smells.

Lucile was busy lighting the kitchen stove, using plenty of paraffin to start it off quickly. It wasn't long before a second car drew up outside, a luxurious one this time, belonging to Dr. Berthomé the surgeon of Fontenay-le-Comte.

The two doctors were a long time alone with the patient. Now and again the door would open for Dr. Naulet to ask for something. In accordance with usage Joséphine Roy had placed a decanter of cognac on the kitchen table for the gendarme who was busy drafting his report. Everybody was on the move, going from one room to another or plunging from the lighted interior into the blackness outside.

The old man had fetched the storm-lantern from the stable and had held it while the sergeant examined the road for any signs of the accident. None had been found.

"Madame Roy . . . would you mind coming up a moment. . . . Or your husband. . . ."

It was Joséphine who went up. Dr. Naulet, who had attended her in several illnesses, held a whispered conversation with her on the landing.

"By all means," she said at last. "If it's any help. . . ."

"Your husband wouldn't object, would he?"

She answered with a wave of her hand. Everyone knew it was she who gave orders in the house. Downstairs she said:

"He can't be moved at present. He'll have to stay here for a day or two. . . . Lucile, the doctor's asking . . ."

The house seemed to be full of people. Nobody so much as thought of supper. The gendarme had already begun to question Lucile.

"You were saying, Mademoiselle?"

"I don't know exactly what time it was, but the light was failing."

"Wait a moment. You say that the light was failing. Had you switched on the light? Or could you still see without it? What were you doing at the time?"

"Putting the apples away in the loft. There isn't any light up there."

"You heard a car coming from the direction of Maillezais . . . you looked out of the window . . ."

"I didn't look out specially. I just glanced out as I passed. But I'm quite sure it was Monsieur Serre's car. He had a horse in tow. . . ."

"Did he stop? . . . Was he going fast?"

"I think he slowed down slightly, but he didn't stop."

"One moment. You say you think he slowed down. . . . Might he have jammed on the brakes suddenly as drivers do when they see something just in front of them?"

"It wasn't anything like that. . . ."

"Still, you think he put the brake on?"

"I couldn't be sure. . . ."

Etienne Roy was ill at ease. He didn't like to sit down, though he didn't know quite what to do with himself standing up. He didn't

look straight at anybody but shifted about uneasily, looking as unhappy as an animal in a thunderstorm. When he thought she wasn't looking, he shot a sidelong glance at his wife, who had remained perfectly calm the whole evening. The old man had at last gone out to milk the cows.

"Sergeant . . ."

He was called upstairs. One of the doctors said:

"Here! I think this'll interest you. . . . You'll have a surprise. . . ."

The sergeant, whose name was Liberge, came down with the injured man's clothes over his arm.

"We'll go on later, Mademoiselle. I must first have a look at the man's papers. . . ."

He started on the pockets and promptly came upon quite a large bundle of bank-notes held together by a red elastic band, which in fact had been cut from the inner tyre of a motor car.

They were thousand-franc notes and the sergeant counted sixty.

"I'll take down the numbers presently. . . ."

A handkerchief. A three-bladed knife. No pipe, cigarettes or matches. The man could hardly have been a smoker.

Looking up, Etienne Roy saw his wife standing close to the table, her eyes fixed on the gendarme's hands as the latter went from pocket to pocket.

"Eight francs in small change. . . . No sign of a wallet. That's funny! . . . No identity card. . . ."

The wet muddy clothes lay in a heap on the kitchen table. They could hear steps overhead as the doctors moved about. The bedroom door opened again.

"Have you boiled any more water?"

"Lucile, fill a jug for them. . . . No. Better take it up in the kettle."

For the last few minutes Etienne Roy had been hankering after another glass of cognac, and he edged up to the table. By one of its feet, he caught sight of something, a piece of paper. He didn't pick it up because he was already making for the decanter. It was a good moment to help himself since his wife was not looking that way.

He filled his glass and lifted it to his lips. He was looking towards the window, but he clearly saw Joséphine stoop down as though to pick up something she had dropped. The next moment, when he looked down, the bit of paper had vanished.

Roy's hand was a little unsteady as he held his glass to his lips, but he tried not to show anything. It was the gendarme who said:

"What have you found?"

Roy was absolutely sure—he'd have staked his last franc on it—that his wife hadn't intended to show the bit of paper. He was sure there was a second's hesitation on her part before she opened her hand.

"Let's have a look at it. . . . You know, the least little thing may be of help in a case like this. . . ."

In a case like this. The words remained engraved on Roy's memory.

The sergeant held the bit of paper right under the light, which hung over the kitchen table. On it were a few pencilled words. He read:

"Gros-Noyer Farm. Saint-Odile par Fontenay-le-Comte.

"Take the La Rochelle road. Turn off towards Maillezais 5 km. from Fontenay."

Joséphine was pale, but then she generally was, and it had become all the more noticeable since her hair had begun to turn grey. She didn't say anything. She seemed quite unconcerned. Not so the gendarme. A keen look had come into his eye.

"Did you see it fall out of one of the pockets?"

"No."

"Why did you pick it up?"

"I'd always pick up a bit of paper that was lying on the floor."

"When was the kitchen swept out last?"

"After dinner. When we'd finished washing up. About two o'clock I suppose. Then we went up to the loft."

"What were you going to do with it?"

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"Nothing . . . When I saw what was on it I'd have given it to you."

"This man who's been hurt . . . You've never seen him before?"

"Never. . . ."

A silence. A heavy awkward silence, so much so that it was a relief to hear Lucile coming downstairs again.

"I think I'd better finish off with Mademoiselle now . . . We'd got to M. Serre's car which you think slowed down a bit as it passed the house."

Etienne Roy was uncomfortable. It was funny how an occurrence like this could change one's ideas about people. He had often had a drink with Liberge the gendarme, and if he met him on the road he had always greeted him familiarly. Now he was suddenly full of respect.

The sergeant too had noticed Joséphine's reluctance to open her hand. There could be no doubt about it. For all the time he was questioning Lucile, he kept on shooting shrewd swift glances at her mother.

A knock on the door. Another gendarme. This one had had to cycle and he was wet through.

"The *procureur* can't send anybody over to-day. He says will you go and see him to-night or else report by telephone. Is the man dead?"

"Not yet. . . ."

A quarter past six. Everyone turned to look at the clock at the same time. A car passed, slowed down for a moment opposite the house, then went on towards Saint-Odile.

"Look here, Menaud," said the sergeant, "we've got to find out whose car that was. . . . It slowed down for a second—no question about that. . . ."

Menaud went off and it wasn't long before he was back again with the news that the vehicle was the same van that had passed earlier, the one belonging to Ligier, the Saint-Odile poultry-dealer. This too was duly recorded in the report which Liberge was patiently writing in his neat hand with its heavy downstrokes and thin

upstrokes. Unquestionably the gendarme knew his job and his report, when it was finally completed, was a model of precision.

Admittedly the unknown man was still unidentified, but around this anonymity a mosaic of information was being pieced together.

First of all there was the bicycle itself. It bore the name and address of Périneau, who had a cycle shop in Fontenay and from whom machines could not only be bought but hired. His shop, which had a workshop behind, was in the *Rue de la République*, three hundred yards from the station.

"Yes, I remember the man perfectly," Périneau was to tell them. He came to the shop about two o'clock, a few minutes after the Velluire train had got in. . . . He had a little suitcase in his hand, one of those cheap fibre ones. . . . He wanted to hire a bike for the rest of the day. He gave me a thousand francs as deposit. . . . Said he hadn't anything smaller on him."

"He rode off with the suitcase?"

"Yes. He had it resting on the handle-bars. It was only a small affair. . . . He asked which was the La Rochelle road. . . ."

The Velluire train connected with the Bordeaux-Nantes express The man's clothes were nautical. . . . Probably he came from Bordeaux.

"When he gave you the thousand-franc note, did he produce a wallet?"

"I can't say. I was pumping up one of the tyres and when I turned round again he had the note in his hand. . . ."

So the man had taken the La Rochelle road from Fontenay and after five kilometres had turned left towards Saint-Odile and Maillezais. Somewhere or other he had to meet Serre's car which was going in the opposite direction. In a statement made the following day Serre affirmed that he had seen neither the man nor his bicycle. If he had slowed down at all it would have been to look at the fallen tree.

A few minutes later Ligier had passed, going the opposite way to Serre.

It was just after that that Lucile had noticed the change in the

man's position, he being now no longer on the grass verge but on the road itself.

Ligier had indeed, as Lucile had supposed, been accompanied by his father. A statement made by an old woman near their garage was to reveal the fact that shortly after their return she had seen the son at work on one of the wings of the car.

"What was he doing to it?"

"I don't know except that he was hammering."

"What time was that?"

"Five minutes past five."

Later on, he drove past *Gros-Noyer* again. This time he was alone in the van. Had he something on his conscience? Was he anxious to know what had happened to the injured man? He had merely slowed down. He hadn't stopped. Perhaps he had seen the two doctor's cars at the farm.

"Why did you go back to Fontenay a second time?"

"I had forgotten something I had to do."

"What?"

"As a matter of fact it was to meet some friends in the *Eden Bar*. . . . No use going to a place like that with my father. He's a wet blanket."

And on checking up it was found that he had indeed been to the bar, where he had stayed only a quarter of an hour, in which time he had had three drinks.

The two doctors came downstairs into the kitchen. The surgeon was rather more solemn and distant than the general practitioner.

"I'm sorry to bother you," said the latter, "but I'm afraid I must ask you to keep him for two or three days. If we moved him now, he'd be dead before he reached the hospital. . . . I can send a nurse along if you like. . . ."

"Is there anything special to do for him?" asked Joséphine Roy.

"Nothing till the morning, except keep an eye on him. . . . I don't suppose he'll be conscious till then, so he can't give you much trouble. . . ."

"In that case I'll look after him myself."

Her husband was looking at her, but she didn't flinch. She seemed to be defying him.

"I suppose there'll be an enquiry," said Dr. Naulet. "When'll they start, Sergeant?"

"To-morrow morning. At nine o'clock."

"Right. I'll be here. I'll have my report ready. . . . I can't say anything at present except that a car seems to have gone over his legs, a car with pretty big wheels."

"A van, possibly?"

"Possibly."

"You'll have something before you go, won't you, gentlemen?"

Dr. Naulet would have accepted like a shot, but since the surgeon from Fontenay refused, he felt he ought to follow suit.

"Thank you. . . . I'm afraid I must be going too. . . . Don't hesitate to ring me up if anything happens. . . ."

The two doctors chatted for a minute in the yard before getting into their cars. Dr. Naulet lit his pipe, the other a cigarette. Then the headlamps were switched on and, one after the other, the two cars backed into the road.

Liberge shut up his notebook, round which he slipped an elastic band. He considered the banknotes for a moment, finally putting them in his pocket.

With his departure the strangers had gone, except for the unconscious man upstairs in the room that had formerly belonged to Mme Clémentine Roy who had passed away piously in her seventy-fourth year after a long and painful illness.

Joséphine removed the dirty glasses and put the decanter, which was now almost empty, back in the cupboard. The old man came back from the cowshed, and this time he left his sabots by the door.

There was no soup that evening, no vegetables. Joséphine climbed on to a chair to get down the ham which hung from the ceiling, saying to Lucile:

"Lay the table."

It seemed an age since the injured man had been brought into the

house, but looking at the clock they were surprised to see it was only eight o'clock.

They were all to themselves now, yet the atmosphere in the room wasn't quite natural. They looked at each other, then quickly averted their eyes, staring at any object that offered itself. Then once more they would start studying each other though always avoiding catching anyone's eye.

"Not for me . . . I won't have one," said Etienne Roy as his wife started breaking eggs on the edge of the frying pan.

And Lucile started, for somehow the words had sounded quite menacing. Even the old man noticed it. He looked up sharply, then relapsed into a brown study.

Everyone's ears were pricked for any sound that might come from above, but none came.

II

Who can claim to know what goes on in another's mind? Even his wife's! Even his dog's!

They were lying side by side in the bed they had slept in for the last twenty-two years. As on every other night, Joséphine had reached out to switch off the light.

"Good night! . . ."

"Good night! . . ."

A sound from the stable—the mare giving a kick to the side of her stall. Nothing else, nothing but a profound wet silence which stretched over the vast spaces of the Vendée marshes and beyond them over the *Bocage* country, over the forests of central France, and to the West over the sea, over a thousand low houses squatting in the mud where men and women slept peacefully side by side and from which no light shone except here and there where there had been a death or a birth or where there was an invalid to watch over.

Etienne lay with his eyes open.

So did Joséphine.

The room wasn't absolutely dark, as a faint glow of light filtered under the door. It came from the other room, the grandmother's, where Lucile was sitting up, she having volunteered to keep the first watch by the injured man's bedside. They had improvised a primitive oil lamp to serve as a night-light, the sort of lamp you see in church burning in front of an image. It gave a miserable light by which Lucile, sitting stiffly in an upright chair, strained her eyes to read one of those cheap novels which she brought back from Fontenay whenever she went shopping there.

Why did Joséphine suddenly break that universal silence to say:

"I wonder who gave him our address. . . ."

Was it just to throw the ball back to her husband? Was it to convince him she had nothing on her mind, that she had nothing to hide and hadn't had the least intention of suppressing the bit of paper?

Etienne pretended to be asleep, but she knew he wasn't. What was he thinking? What were they both thinking, as they gazed open-eyed into the darkness?

He really was asleep when at two o'clock Joséphine went to relieve her daughter. He woke up at his usual time, dressed, and went down. When he crossed the farmyard in his sabots there was only the merest hint of daylight in the East.

In the cowshed, the milking had already begun, Etienne's father crouching under one cow, Lucile, despite her vigil, under another.

Later, the family sat as usual round the kitchen table, Joséphine in her black Sunday clothes, having just got back from low mass. Her missal, which she had put down on the dresser, had a loose binding of black felt. No one said more than was necessary, and their remarks, when they did speak, were about everyday matters, about the food they were eating or about the animals on the farm.

"A queer fish . . ." the *procureur* was to say, referring to Etienne Roy when he thought he couldn't be overheard. . . .

"*Drôle de type! . . .*"

The observation would be overheard, however, and by Etienne himself, who, being of a suspicious turn of mind, had a ready ear for any remark that was made behind his back. A few months previously, for instance, as he was leaving the café, he had distinctly heard what young Jean Léveillé had said about him.

"*C'est un original. . .*"

Original, in the language of the village, meant only a little less than having a screw loose.

He didn't go up to change. He wasn't going to high mass. Neither was his father for that matter, but when it was over he would be joining his friends for a game of cards in the village inn. In any case nothing would ever prevent old Evariste Roy putting on his best clothes on a Sunday, even if it was only for an hour.

It was Liberge, the sergeant of the *gendarmerie*, who got there first. He had ridden over on his bicycle. The evening before he had been sitting with them at the kitchen table helping himself to cognac. Why then, on this dirty grey morning should he remain outside? He hung about, a hundred yards from the house, and by the look of him you'd have thought he was trying to keep out of sight.

Back in her everyday clothes Joséphine washed the kitchen tiles then went to sweep out and dust the parlour. Lucile was upstairs dressing for church. With a fork in his hand, Etienne was over by the dunghill tidying up the yard.

It wasn't actually raining, but the clouds came down lower and lower till they blotted out the top of the trees. When the two first cars arrived, their occupants stood for a minute in a little group on the road staring gloomily at the dismal rain-sodden landscape.

An hour later, the stretch of road in front of the farm was reminiscent of the cycle race which took place every year on the day of the *fête du pays*, when all the village lined up under the hedges to see the half-dozen sinewy athletes race past on their round which went by Montreuil, Vix, and Pont-aux-Chèvres.

The youngsters darted in and out amongst the crowd. Their elder brothers, their hair smarmed down with brilliantine, laughed and made sallies at the girls who tittered in response.

The spectacle they were there to enjoy was provided by the experts who went over every inch of the road. When Dr. Naulet arrived he stopped outside for a good ten minutes talking to them before finally entering the house. Inside, his first words to Joséphine were:

"Well? . . . He's still alive, is he?"

More onlookers appeared, having walked over from Saint-Pierre-le-Vieux to join the Saint-Odile crowd.

A gendarme went off towards the village, and when he returned with young Ligier in the latter's van everyone looked at the poultry-dealer as though he was already on his way to prison.

"Where's your father?" he was asked.

"He's at home. He isn't well this morning."

The gendarme was sent back to fetch him.

"Tell him he's got to come. If he's ill, he should have sent for the doctor. . . ."

Young Ligier tried to carry it off with a swagger, but as he looked round it was with an anxious eye. A crafty type. So, for that matter, was his father.

Now and again, the men stopped their work to stare for a moment at the farm—a broad grey stone frontage in the severe style of the eighteenth century. One of them pointed to the little round window in the loft and the sergeant nodded.

Etienne Roy refused to take any interest in the proceedings. For him the whole thing was a farce. Strangers walked in and out of his house as though it were theirs.

"Has anybody got a tape measure? . . ."

There were more people inside. They wandered about the house, with muddy boots without any "by your leave" or "with your leave." One of them—as a matter of fact it was the examining magistrate—stopped in front of the kitchen dresser, gazed at a plate, called one of his colleagues over, and finally turned to the lady of the house to say:

"Look here! . . . Do you mean to say that's genuine?"

Crows circled in the sky. It being a Sunday, the people below

were as black as they were. Someone brought out the injured man's suit and laid it out by the roadside, presumably to represent the body. Lucile calmly pointed out the exact place in which she had first seen it. Young Ligier answered questions snappily, his father with a lot of gesticulations. Etienne pottered about the farmyard, keeping his distance. It was no business of his, though he couldn't help an occasional sidelong glance at the road, on which someone was measuring distances, as though marking it out for a race.

"Look here, my good man! . . ."

Why "my good man"? Couldn't the *procureur* call a chap by his proper name? He was in a hurry of course, as he was due to lunch with some friends.

"Have you got a room set aside for us? . . . We want to start our enquiry. . . ."

When the parlour door was opened for them, the visitors were greeted by a breath of the past. Everything in the room spoke of the antecedents of that house—the old, well-polished furniture, the wallpaper, the ornaments that had stood in exactly the same place from time immemorial, and lastly the photographs, wedding groups and christening groups and enlarged portraits which told the story of a family.

"Liberge!" called out the *procureur*. "We'll settle down here . . . I suppose the shutters can be opened. . . ."

He tried himself, but without success. To tell the truth the shutters were opened about three times a year and it wasn't surprising if they were stiff. The gendarme came to his assistance, however, and it wasn't long before he did the trick. Through the open windows came a breath of chill damp air and they were shut as soon as possible.

The *procureur* rearranged the room to his liking, removing the ornamental bowl and the runner which encumbered the table, and putting the chairs where he wanted them. Then he sat down and spread out his papers in front of him.

It was just as Etienne Roy left the room that the *procureur*, with a jerk of his chin towards the door, said to the examining magistrate:

"*Drôle de type!*"

Perhaps he had expected the farmer to help him with the shutters, but the latter was not in the least inclined to play the host. He did what was asked of him, no more.

If the room was full of family history, the *procureur* was quite oblivious of it. For him the framed photographs were like the ornaments, objects that could be bought at any cheap bazaar. Lucile was the first person to be called in.

"Sit down, Mademoiselle. . . . Yesterday you made certain statements to Sergeant Liberge. My clerk will read the gendarme's report over to you, after which I will ask you to let us have your signature If you have anything to add . . ."

Some of the younger members of the crowd, with less discretion than their elders, were clustered at the two windows of the parlour, trying to see in. Liberge went and chased them away.

"*On this twenty-first day of October, at half-past four in the afternoon, I was occupied with my mother storing apples in the loft. . . .*"

Roy looked round for Joséphine. He found her standing in the doorway. For a moment they looked into each other's eyes. Etienne was the first to look away, his gaze shifting to his father.

The *procureur* had never set foot in Saint-Odile before. While the clerk was reading, he stood fidgeting with the ornaments on the mantelpiece. They meant nothing to him. Nothing in that house meant anything to him except that face which had inspired the reflection:

"*Drôle de type!*"

He didn't know what all the people standing outside knew—or at all events all except the younger generation. He didn't know why Etienne Roy was not quite like other people or why he so often looked as though he was expecting a sudden blow that never came.

He had received one before. A severe blow, if you like. A much worse sort of blow than the one that had laid the stranger out on the road the previous afternoon. He had been eleven years old at the time.

It was the day of the village fête and Etienne's father had slipped

away from the dance with the baker's daughter in tow and disappeared into the darkness.

Everybody had had a good deal to drink. The children ran wild. Nobody thought of putting them to bed.

Presently Etienne's father returned. There was a lewd look in his eye, and the girl was rather red in the face. Nivet, the baker, was waiting for them, his fists clenched. The row began, however, with words.

"I'd have thought you'd have had the sense to behave yourself, Roy, seeing as how you're only a jumped-up farm hand who married his boss's daughter to give cover to the child she was going to have—and it wasn't even yours. . . ."

No one noticed that young Etienne was there except Bertrand, a boy of his own age who had since become the village blacksmith and who was now standing with the others outside *Gros-Noyer*.

It was he who had made things plain if they weren't so already.

"Do you hear that?"

"Hear what?"

"What Nivet's saying to your father—that he's not your father at all. . . ."

No. The *procureur* knew nothing of all that. All he noticed was that there was something a bit queer about this farmer who had stood watching him struggle with the shutters.

In the family the subject had never been broached. Neither Etienne nor his father had ever referred to it.

Did Evariste even know that his son knew?

For forty-five years they had lived in the same house and sat at the same table. Their talk had been of cattle and crops. Yesterday, for instance, they had been planning to sow the oats as soon as the weather changed, which, they agreed, would probably be at new moon. But about the other thing neither of them knew how much the other knew.

On the night of the village fête, there hadn't been a fight after all. For Evariste Roy hadn't answered the baker. He had put his pride in his pocket and slouched off amid general laughter.

It was quite true: he had been a farm labourer. What's more, he had never quite ceased to be one. He had always left the initiative to others, first his wife, then Etienne, and had always been ready for the roughest work. Apparently he preferred things that way. He had even slept by himself in one of the meanest rooms of the house.

Etienne and Bertrand had done their military service together, stationed at Montpellier. One day when they had been drinking together, Etienne plucked up his courage to ask:

"Do you know who it was?"

"They say it was a chap from Paris—a dentist, I believe—who had come with his wife and children for a summer holiday. They stayed at the house that used to be the Gauchers', but was sold two years ago. . . ."

The *procurer* looked at the enlarged photograph of Etienne's mother, mildly interested in her elaborate peasant headdress. A small woman with a lined face. He didn't know she had spent almost twenty years of her life, an invalid, alone in the room upstairs in which the injured man was now lying.

"Having brought the clothes into Monsieur Roy's kitchen, I proceeded, in the presence of the latter, of his wife Madame Roy née Violet, and of his daughter already mentioned, to search the pockets methodically, the contents of which I found to be as follows:

"A white linen handkerchief, wet but with no trace of blood.

"Sixty thousand-franc notes, numbered. . . ."

Why did old Evariste Roy turn to look at Etienne?

"While I was making a list of the contents of the pockets, I saw Madame Roy stoop down and pick something up. She did not see that I had noticed, and I had the impression she was intending to conceal the piece of paper in her hand. On my request, however, she gave it to me and I saw it bore the address of the farm. . . ."

The *procurer* turned and looked calmly at Joséphine. The reading went on. Not till it was over did he ask her casually:

"Had you any particular motive in picking up the bit of paper?"

"No. I just saw it lying on the floor."

"Did you intend to conceal it from the sergeant?"

"No."

The *procureur* nodded. He seemed satisfied. He leant over towards the examining magistrate and said something to him in a low voice. The latter agreed.

"Bring in the woman. . . ."

The examining magistrate paused and fumbled among his papers. It was Liberge who prompted him:

" . . . the woman Sareau . . ."

If the lawyers were surprised to find she was drunk, nobody else was, for that was her normal condition.

For the *procureur*, the bit of paper had been written off as an incident of no significance. What interested him were the Ligiers and their van. In fact, in his mind, this was already classified as the Ligier Case.

The questions at issue were these:

Had the Ligiers, driving in their van, run over a cyclist as they passed *Gros-Noyer*?

Had they later tried to remove the traces of the accident by patching up the damaged wing?

Had the son driven back a second time to Fontenay-le-Comte for no other purpose than to pass the farm again and see what had become of their victim?

At the time of the accident, was the stranger still in possession of the little suitcase which Périneau, the cycle-dealer of Fontenay, had described? And if so what had become of it?

Outside, the police were searching for it in the ditches and even in the surrounding fields. Upstairs an official photographer was photographing the injured man. Dr. Naulet was there too. A little earlier he had sneaked down to the kitchen to cadge a glass of cognac from Evariste Roy.

In the parlour, the interrogation of the woman Sareau had begun as usual with surname, Christian names, age, and occupation.

She was notorious in the village and the people outside were chuckling over the comic turn they knew she would be playing.

When the Ligiers were questioned they disclaimed, like Serre, all knowledge of the accident. When the examining magistrate had done with them, they asked if they could go.

"Yes. But you mustn't leave the neighbourhood without notifying the police."

"What about the poultry? We have to go to Callans for that. . . ."

"So long as the police know all about it. . . ."

It was all over by twelve, when the church bells pealed and when the sky lit up a bit, reflected in bright patches on the glistening road. In twos and threes the onlookers drifted back towards the village still discussing the unusual event and turning occasionally to have another look at the farm.

The officials hadn't actually left. Here and there a little group held a whispered pow-wow in a corner. The *procureur* and the examining magistrate had buttonholed Dr. Naulet. There were shruggings of shoulders.

"Hey! . . . Roy! . . ."

The *procureur* beckoned him as though he'd known him for years.

"Look here . . . The doctor tells me the fellow upstairs has about one chance in ten of pulling through. If he's moved now, he won't have even that. . . . On the other hand, if it's too great a burden to you, you must say so frankly. If Madame Roy . . ."

Joséphine came up to them. Even in her everyday clothes, even when she went milking, she never managed to look like a peasant. She looked countrified all right, but definitely a *bourgeoise*. At forty she was still good-looking, with fine, keen, dark eyes.

"He can stay here, *Monsieur le Procureur*. My daughter and I will look after him."

Her husband had said nothing and the *procureur* turned enquiringly to him.

"He can stay," said Roy.

"Thank you. . . . And now it only remains to apologise for . . ."

For the parlour they had turned upside-down, for the bits of paper lying on the floor, for the cigarette ends, for the muddy foot-marks all over the house. . . .

All of which the *procureur*, quite polite all of a sudden, excused with a wave of his hand and a courtly bow to Joséphine, a bow that was slightly exaggerated. Indeed you might have thought she was a real lady, not just a farmer's wife.

In spite of all the disturbance, Joséphine had found time to cook some *moquettes* with bits of pickled pork in them. She shut the parlour door and started laying the table in the kitchen. The old man waited as usual outside, smoking his pipe. Later, when he sat down to dinner, he took his big knife out of his pocket, opened it and put it down beside his plate.

"Have you been to see the rabbit?" Joséphine asked her daughter.

"She's started," answered Lucile, helping herself.

An occasional voice outside, a few passing cars. And Evariste Roy kept looking furtively at Etienne under his grey eyebrows, that were so bushy as to look almost like a misplaced moustache.

Why should Etienne, as he munched his food, suddenly think:

"They won't live. . . ."

He was thinking of the little rabbits that were at that moment being born. They'd die. It wasn't just a fancy idea. He knew it. Just as surely as old Micou knew what he was talking about when he abruptly came out with:

"The wind'll be fallen by evening."

Without even looking at the sky.

Etienne had always known when misfortune was imminent. It was like a sudden weight that fell on his shoulders. Perhaps it was that that had given him his slightly shifty look. He was always trying to forestall misadventure and spy out the direction from which it might come.

As a boy, going to school in sabots and in a black hooded cape, the thought would dart into his mind:

"Something's going to happen to-day."

When "something was going to happen," it was never anything good. And sure enough he'd get into trouble in class or be embroiled in a fight during the break and go home with his clothes torn or a bloody nose.

The foreboding of evil seemed only to attract it! In the army the sergeant had always picked on him when anything went wrong and he had never been popular with his fellow-conscripts.

"It's bound to end badly. . . ."

That was another of his favourite reflections. Always justified in the event. As when he had gone down with pleurisy and been three months in hospital. Even now, when the weather was bad, he was apt to go chesty and cough for a week on end.

"They seem convinced it was Ligier," said Lucile.

The others looked at her. Nobody asked her what she thought herself. In that farmhouse there were invisible walls between its occupants.

A queer place it might be; *Gros-Noyer* was none the less the best farm in the neighbourhood and the house itself better kept than any other. You would have to wander far in the marshlands or the *Bocage* country to find a kitchen as clean and inviting, whiter sheets, or better polished floors, and it was well known that Roy's cows and poultry were finer than any other's, his wine better made, racked off as many as six times.

And people would adopt quite a reverential tone to say of some pears:

"They're from *Gros-Noyer*. . . ."

In market gardening the Roys were the first in the district to grow *petits pois*, fine tender French beans, and other luxury vegetables, and they did quite a business in cut flowers.

The Ligier case had begun, and the papers next morning would be publishing a full account of the day's proceedings, together with a photograph of the injured man and another of young Ligier standing by his van in front of the farm.

The Police got busy questioning porters, guards, and ticket collectors. Armed with photographs of the stranger, they made enquiries at all the hotels in Bordeaux and at the shipping offices.

"They hadn't much to go on. What did they know about the man? Nothing whatever.

Why did he go to Saint-Odile, or rather to *Gros-Noyer*? And why had he provided himself with sixty thousand francs?

What had become of his little suitcase, which presumably contained his papers or at any rate something by which he could be identified?

It was the absence of that suitcase that had puzzled the examining magistrate more than all the rest. He had tackled Roy about it.

"It was you who brought the man in, wasn't it?"

"Yes."

"You didn't see anything else on the road?"

"Only the bicycle."

"No sign of a little suitcase or anything of that sort?"

"No."

"Did you go back to the place later with the sergeant, when your father was carrying the storm lantern?"

Yes he had. But what was the use of all these questions? He hadn't seen any suitcase and that was all about it! They could believe him or not, just as they liked. And Joséphine would be one of those who wouldn't!

"Had you seen the man before?"

"No."

"He didn't even remind you of anybody?"

"No."

That last question had been a pertinent one. Etienne had looked hard at the stranger and had looked for a resemblance—to Lucile.

He hadn't found any. If Lucile bore no resemblance to her father, neither did she to the sailor, for that was what the papers were going to call the unknown man, for want of a name.

She was like her mother. Only her mother.

And her mother was not of the same race as Etienne Roy, or the examining magistrate, the *procureur*, or any of the others. She was of a race apart.

Had the examining magistrate noticed it? Probably not. He would hardly have bothered to look deep down into those eyes of hers. Why should he? Her origin was no business of his.

For the rest, admittedly, she was just like other people, except that she was better, better at all events than the women living around. If her house was clean and well-ordered, it was her doing. That was how she wanted things. For meals a table-cloth was spread and the table properly laid, and old Evariste Roy was the only one to make use of his pocket-knife. Due to her, and to no one else.

It was the last thing anybody had expected.

For, when Etienne brought her to his home, she was . . .

She was a Violet! And if the examining magistrate had searched his records—or better still the police records of Nantes—he would have discovered, not one Violet, but a whole tribe.

Where they had originally come from would be useless to enquire. They were the people you see on the roads in impossible vehicles travelling from fair to fair, people whose numbers you can never count as they swarm and segregate like micro-organisms. They pitch a tent on the outskirts of a market and sell silk stockings, reels of thread, sheets, razors, and anything you like.

That's what Etienne had married into! A tribe of gipsies. Exactly!

He had met her in La Roche-sur-Yon, where he'd been to buy a mare. Thin, vivacious, and caustic, she had teased him for an hour. He hadn't seen her again for months, but had been unable to get her out of his mind.

If she had once again come within his range, it was unwittingly. He had found her one day in Fontenay-le-Comte serving at the *Trois Pigeons*, an inn near the market which he went to every Saturday.

Where had she left her tribe? What had become of it since? Joséphine never referred to it. One might have thought she'd forgotten its very existence.

Etienne was a shy, awkward young man, always afraid people were making fun of him. His dread of impending catastrophe sapped his self-confidence. He sat alone, tucked away unobtrusively in a corner. He drank whatever she chose to bring him, and he watched her as she went from table to table, watched the movements of her lithe well-shaped legs and her accordion-pleated black silk skirt.

She didn't know who he was. Perhaps she asked the men at another table, for Etienne felt sure, at one moment, that they were talking of him. When she stood in front of him, her head high, her lips always a little wet, he looked at her with pleading eyes.

"Why . . . Why shouldn't we. . . ." he stammered.

She understood perfectly what he meant. He was so overcome with desire that his body ached.

"When?"

He was ready to give anything. . . .

"Just once. . . . Only once. . . ."

"Perhaps. . . ."

"When?"

"I don't know. . . ."

He jumped at every pretext for going to Fontenay, till finally he was going every day. He knew it was a mistake. He knew he was making a fool of himself. But he couldn't help it. Night after night, he was the last to leave the *Trois Pigeons* and the inn-keeper wasn't blind to the reason.

"This evening?"

"To-morrow, perhaps. . . ."

And then one day she whispered:

"Ask for a room. I'll show you up myself."

He had to invent an excuse for staying and found that one of the mare's shoes was loose. She was put into the stable.

Holding a candle that threw grotesque shadows onto the walls, Joséphine led him up the narrow stairs.

"Go to bed . . . I might manage to come along later."

He waited an hour. The inn-keeper and his wife occupied the adjoining room. At last the door opened. The girl whispered:

"You're not in bed yet?"

For three whole weeks after that she wouldn't let him come near her.

It made him almost ill. Only once, he had said, but now with equal obsession he wanted just once more. Just one more night like that one, fantastic as it had been, since they had had to observe the

strictest silence for fear of waking the master and mistress who were separated from them by a thin lath-and-plaster partition.

"Listen, Joséphine We must, we absolutely must. . . ."

Once again he could feel the disaster that was approaching, yet there was no holding back.

"We must get married. . . ."

It was that slender girl who now, as Joséphine Roy, carried herself with such ease and dignity at the farm. From an inn-keeper's maid-of-all-work she became the mistress of *Gros-Noyer*, and she took the change in her stride, without the least apparent effort, as though that was the fate that had always been waiting for her.

Their child was born prematurely, but only by a matter of a fortnight, and the doctor—Dr. Naulct's predecessor—had said it was quite a common occurrence. At birth, Lucile had a birthmark as big as a penny on her left cheek, but the doctor had told them not to worry about it as it would probably go of its own. It had indeed diminished until it was now no more than a slightly irregular beauty spot.

Joséphine didn't wait till the next day to tidy up the parlour. Soon all traces of the morning's enquiry were effaced. Etienne had no inclination to go into the village. The inn, he knew, would be buzzing with the Ligier affair.

He went out into the yard, then to the *chais*, where he started rinsing out the barrels into which he was going to rack off his wine at new moon.

Lucile helped her mother. She rarely went out, and when she did it was not for amusement. Never had she been seen out with a boy. Her one recreation was reading the little novels she bought at Fontenay. She could have read the whole day long. She could have read while milking a cow.

It was strange that the gendarme had noticed it too—the bit of paper Joséphine had picked up. Indeed he had attached sufficient importance to it to mention it in his report. . . .

Admittedly the *procureur* had brushed it aside. . . .

But what did a man like that know of these things? A man

brought up in Paris, no doubt, or in a big town like Lyons or Lille! . . .

One by one, Etienne Roy rolled his barrels over to the pump and filled them with water. Towards the end of the afternoon, old Evariste, once more in his Sunday clothes, having seen to the live-stock, slouched off towards Saint-Odile, where he would spend the rest of the day in the village inn.

III

"Gee up! . . ."

La Grise thrust her head forward and lowered her haunches, wrenching her hooves, one after the other, from the heavy clay soil by the edge of the ditch, and started off on another round. Balanced on the narrow iron seat, swaying this way and that, Etienne Roy pulled the lever which released the fine shower of seed.

For how many hours had he been at work sowing the oats, going backwards and forwards, up towards the house, then down again to the ditch at the bottom of the slope where the field was fringed with poplars?

He had been at it all the morning, to and fro, to and fro, with monotonous regularity. The only change was when he turned round to be faced suddenly by another landscape as abruptly as if he had been turning over the pages of a book. For a few minutes he would be contemplating the downward slope, a long hedge that was full of blackbirds, and the shivering poplars that now and then cast a handful of leaves, like birds, into the autumn air. Then the turn, and for a while he would be gazing at the back end of the village, a few low houses separated by yards or little gardens, and further on, a man ploughing in a field.

The sky changed too, almost as abruptly as the landscape. At one moment, great white clouds with only a touch of grey on their

bellies would drift apart to let through a bright ray of sunshine, the next it would be overcast again and long drops of slanting rain would beat against his face.

"Gee up! La Grise! . . ."

And a second or two later, would come the old man's voice as he called to the two oxen, Pigeon and Voyageur who, fifty yards behind, were drawing the harrow.

Evariste Roy walked beside his team, with slow regular strides, he too dragging his feet out of the heavy soil, and in rhythm with his step his goad touched the oxens' withers.

All the morning, one behind the other. Then at two o'clock they had started again. There were still three more runs to do, and there was still just about enough daylight left to finish the job, though the pace had slackened.

Etienne on his little iron seat, Evariste on foot. At each turn they crossed, looking at each other with expressionless eyes.

"Hue! La Grise! . . ."

They had always had a grey mare at *Gros-Noyer*. The first had been the one Etienne had bought at La Roche-sur-Yon twenty-three years before, the day he'd met Joséphine for the first time. Why had he gone to La Roche for one? He could just as well have waited for the fairs at Niort or Marans.

They had been called after their colour. It was that first La Grise—she had a white spot on her forehead—that a panic-stricken Etienne had hurriedly harnessed to fetch the doctor from Maillezais the night Lucile was born.

It was her own filly, Grisette who had taken her place when she was drowned in a ditch.

Grisette had had several colts, but only one filly. The latter in turn was called La Grise, and she was the mare Etienne was now driving.

Three life-cycles of mares, yet only one man in one and the same landscape, the same trees standing immutably—all but the great walnut tree that had just fallen.

Up and down, up and down, and his thoughts too kept always coming back to the same point. Each time he turned at the ditch

and once more faced the village, his eyes mechanically looked for a uniform, a black and silver uniform with a *képi*, for, during the last two days, Liberge had been constantly hanging about.

Of course! Why not? Wasn't he busy on the Ligier case? Twice that morning he had snooped about in the Ligiers' garage while they were away at Maillezais. Then he'd spent quite a long time in old Mother Sareau's little garden while she was hoeing her cabbages.

Only, for Etienne Roy, the Ligier case had nothing to do with the Ligiers. The game was going to be played out between him and the gendarme. He was convinced of it. They hadn't yet come to grips, not by a long chalk. They were merely stalking each other, taking each other's measure.

And just as Roy's eyes sought the gendarme, so the latter would stop every now and again at the corner of a lane and stand motionless, gazing at the two untiring figures in the field.

It couldn't go on like that for ever, but the sergeant bided his time. . . . Two turns more, then only one. . . . The wheels of the drill brushed the hawthorn in the hedge, on the other side of which the man was still ploughing.

Three lives of mares to less than one of a man. . . . La Grise, Grisette, and then another La Grise. . . . And the last had just the same white spot on her forehead as the first.

A good hour had elapsed since Dr. Naulet's car had first drawn up at the side of the house. The doctor had driven off again almost at once. He had been to the post office to put through a call, there being no telephone at the farm. He hadn't been away long, and soon after his return another car had arrived, the big car with glistening chromium fittings that belonged to the surgeon, who had driven over post-haste from Fontenay-le-Comte.

During the three days that the injured man had been under his roof, Etienne had never once been into the sick-room. No, that was a woman's affair. Particularly Lucile's. There was nothing much for her to do, and she read for hours on end.

Why didn't Lucile get married, like any other girl? Why didn't she go out with some young man? Something had happened when

she was sixteen, but nobody knew exactly what. At that time she had been seen constantly on her bicycle, and people said she went every day to the Forêt de Mervent.

It became increasingly obvious that the gendarme was waiting for him, until finally, abandoning any pretence of being interested in other things, he stood on the edge of the field, watching the farmer, his *képi* pulled over his eyes.

"*Hue! La Grise. . .*"

With an extra effort the mare drew the machine up onto the grassy bank.

"Hallo, Roy! . . ."

"Hallo, Sergeant! . . ."

The greetings were spoken in a more than usually casual tone, the sort of tone a farmer adopts at a fair when he enquires the price of a bull he means to buy.

"Nice day, Roy. . . . Good day for sowing oats. . . ."

The wheels of the drill churned up the ruts of the little cart track that led to the farmyard. Liberge kept as far as he could from the machine so as not to get his shiny black boots muddy.

"It looks as though things are taking a turn for the worse. I expect you saw Dr. Berthomé's car arrive. . . . The chap may be dead by now. . . ."

He knew he wasn't. He was talking for the sake of talking and to draw Etienne out. He knew that, in a case of that sort, if a man could hold on for three days there was a good chance he'd pull through.

"*Hue! Hue! . . .*"

Etienne jumped down from his seat. His father, with the bullocks, was following behind.

Liberge watched Roy unharness the mare, who went over to drink at the stone trough at the side of the yard.

"Look here, Roy. . . ."

"Yes, Sergeant? . . ."

The farmer shot a sidelong glance at the gendarme as he carried the harness into the stable. It wasn't lost on the latter. If Roy looked at him like that, he must be hiding something!

"Suppose we went and had a drink at the inn. . . ."

Which meant:

"We can't settle down to a chat in your place. I know very well you don't rule the roost here and that as soon as your wife hears us in the kitchen she'll come and stand over us. . . . I want to get you alone, man to man. . . ."

Affecting an air of indifference Roy answered:

"Just as you like. . . ."

His legs were stiff from so many hours of sitting. There was nobody in the kitchen, so the two doctors and the two women were all gathered in the sick-room. The road to the village was almost dry with only a wet patch here and there, like damp patches on a wallpaper.

The two men walked in silence for a hundred yards, then Roy opened up with: "Well? How's it going?"

"Ligier," answered the gendarme. "It can only be Ligier. We've had a look at Serre's tyres. It certainly wasn't them that went over the man's legs. No, they were the tyres of the Ligier's van. When young Ligier comes back from Maillezais I've got to take him to Fontenay-le-Comte. . . ."

Roy looked at the sergeant and the latter responded with a wave of his hand which was intended to mean:

"There we are! It's in the bag. . . ."

If he expected Roy to show some sign of satisfaction, he was disappointed. The farmer's face betrayed not the faintest interest. They went on. It was the sergeant who pushed open the door of the inn, standing aside for Roy to enter first.

The place was empty and they chose the table by the window.

"What shall we have?"

"A *chopine*. . . ."

The landlady filled a *chopine* in the cellar and put it on their table, then returned to her kitchen where the soup was boiling over an open fire.

"Here's luck, Roy. . . ."

"Same to you, Sergeant."

When was the gendarme going to come to the point? He stared across the road into the blacksmith's shop in the semi-darkness of which two figures could just be made out.

"You know, Roy . . . I was thinking . . . Just turning things over in my mind . . . About that chap, of course. . . . And I had an idea. . . . If he pulls through there won't be any point in it, as he'll tell us himself who he is. . . ."

Etienne's big eyes assumed a glassy look when he was trying to appear unconcerned.

"Naturally, he'll tell us," he said. •

"Only, if he dies without regaining consciousness . . . To tell the truth, it's that bit of paper I'm thinking about that fell out of his pocket. . . ."

The table had been given a high polish by generations of peasants' elbows. The walls were painted dark green. They had always been like that, for a century perhaps, or longer still. And on them had hung—ever since Etienne could remember—on one side of the fireplace a lithograph advertising a brand of *apéritif* a bottle of which stood proudly by a bowl of fruit, and on the other, in a black and gold frame, the inevitable copy of the Law Relating to Drunkenness in Public.

"And thinking it all over . . . You see we know a thing or two. Can't help it . . . And your father—not that there's anything dishonourable about it—well, nobody can deny that he was always after anything in skirts. . . ."

A glint came into his eye as he glanced at the farmer.

"Sometimes he even went a bit too far. . . ."

That was true enough. But it wasn't fair to say that old Evariste Roy had *always* been running after girls. It belonged to a certain period, two or three years perhaps after his marriage, a period when he also became very slovenly in his personal appearance. Etienne had heard about his affairs. The first victim had been a young girl in service at *Gros-Noyer*. It had set a lot of tongues wagging. She had left the house precipitately, and some said she'd had a baby and that Evariste had had to pay money to get the affair hushed up.

"You see what I'm getting at? . . ."

Even now, when he'd had an extra *chopine* of wine at the inn, the old man had been known to make a pass at one of the village girls. It didn't lead to anything and everybody laughed at him. Ten years before, he had sometimes sneaked off to pay a visit to the Sareau woman.

"And I said to myself: 'Now look at it this way, Liberge . . . According to Dr. Naulet the man's a bit under thirty-five, or may be a bit older. And supposing the old man had put a girl in a family way without anybody's knowing, about thirty-five years ago.' . . .

"Got it? . . . At a stretch he could even be the chap's grandfather, only in that case he'd have had to start pretty young. . . . Of course, I'm not saying that's what happened. . . . It's just an idea. . . . And I thought that a little friendly chat . . . Of course, I wouldn't like you to think I was poking my nose into what was no business of mine. . . ."

"After all, it's your job," said Roy innocently.

It was just that innocent way of his that made some people say he was deep, others that he was shifty. But if there was any false play, it was the sergeant who had started it. Etienne had seen through him from the first.

"Here's luck, anyway. . . . Shall we have another? . . . Madame Micou . . . Bring in another *chopine*, will you? . . . As for me, when I see a man nobody knows come to a little place like this where there's nothing to attract holiday-makers. . . . Look here. I'm going to read you something. It'll be in the papers tomorrow morning so I'm not giving away anything. . . ."

He brought out his little notebook, from which he took a sheet of paper.

"Height 5 ft. 9 in.

"Apparent age 33 or 34.

"One tooth crowned, gold. 1st upper pre-molar, left side."

To help matters, the gendarme opened his mouth and pointed out the tooth in question.

"Soft well-kept hands incompatible with manual work.

"Enlarged liver and other signs suggest a considerable part of life spent in tropics.

"Clothes of nautical style, apparently worn for about a month, made by an American firm, one, however, which exports clothes to many countries, though seldom to Europe."

Liberge winked.

"They know their job, those chaps of the *Brigade Mobile*. At Bordeaux they've already found the man in the booking-office who sold him the ticket to Fontenay. He remembered doing so because his customer had no change and produced a fat wad of bank-notes in an elastic band—only to stuff them back in his pocket when he found he had some change after all. . . .

"The previous day it happened that two liners called at Bordeaux. The *Asie* belonging to the *Chargers Réunis* from Pointe Noire and West African ports, and the *Wisconsin* from San Francisco via the Panama Canal. Unfortunately both ships have since sailed."

Was Etienne listening? The gendarme looked at him.

"Well, Roy? . . . What do you think?"

And the farmer answered with a vague:

"Yes. . . ."

"Suppose somewhere in Africa or America there was someone who knew your father's name and address. . . . You see the idea, don't you? . . . If he wasn't coming to France himself, he might have had a friend who was coming. . . . I simply can't get it out of my head that the fellow was coming to see someone at *Gros-Noyer*. That's why I wanted to have a chat with you. After all, you live there and might well have some idea about it yourself. . . . Don't think I'm trying to make trouble. You needn't fear anything of that sort from me. . . . But to come back to your father . . ."

Roy got to his feet and rapped on the table with a coin.

"The bill. . . ."

"No, no," protested Liberge. "This is on me."

But Roy wouldn't listen to him. He paid and held out a limphand.

"I must be getting home, Sergeant. . . . So long. . . ."

Young Ligier didn't yet know he was going to be arrested, but

he may well have suspected something of the sort, to judge by the way he looked apprehensively up and down the road as he unloaded the van in front of his house.

Roy trudged back to the farm, turning a problem over in his mind.

Why should Liberge, who was quite a clever fellow, have tried to make him swallow that silly story?

It was almost dark when Roy got home. The two cars were still there and chinks of light came through the shutters of the room upstairs. A redder light glowed in the cowshed where old Evariste was milking alone. There was nobody in the kitchen, but the parlour door opened and Joséphine said calmly:

"Come in here. The doctors are waiting for you. . . ."

He wiped his feet carefully and hung his cap up on a peg. In the parlour the lamp that hung from the middle of the ceiling—an oil lamp that had been converted to electricity—shed a rose-coloured light on the polished furniture.

"Come in, Roy," said Dr. Naulet cordially.

A bottle of old wine had been fetched up from the cellar. Lucile was there too, looking more determined than usual.

"It's like this, Roy . . . But we didn't like to decide anything without first consulting you. . . . It now seems as though the patient, contrary to all expectation, is going to recover. . . ."

Etienne tried to look natural, but he knew the surgeon was looking at him with curiosity, no doubt saying to himself, like the *procureur*:

"*Drôle de type!*"

"He has come out of his coma," went on Dr. Naulet, "though that doesn't mean he's regained consciousness. . . . Sometimes, when he opens his eyes, he looks like a frightened child. . . . The thing is, he's now in a condition to be moved, and Dr. Berthomé is ready to take him into his clinic. . . ."

Etienne glanced at Joséphine, then at Lucile. In the latter's eyes was something he had not seen before, a sort of fervour.

"When I suggested it to Madame Roy and your daughter they asked me whether it wouldn't be better all the same to leave him where he is. I gathered from their attitude that . . ."

He hesitated and Lucile intervened to say encouragingly:

"He'll be better off here."

Joséphine said nothing. She was staring at the glasses on the table, though she certainly didn't see them.

"Later on, when he's fully conscious again," pursued the doctor, "the patient must decide for himself. Until then Dr. Berthomé and I see no objection to his staying here, provided, of course, on your side. . . ."

Etienne answered with a question: "Why shouldn't he stay?"

"That's very kind of you, Roy. . . . Though I felt sure that was what you'd say. . . . As for your daughter, she's showing herself to be a first rate nurse, and I'm sure . . ."

"A chatter-box!" thought Etienne, who, for politeness' sake poured himself out a thimbleful of wine and clinked glasses with the visitors, after which the latter promptly took their leave.

It was high time to go and help the old man with the milking. Leaving Joséphine to get the supper ready, he and Lucile, with pails in their hands, went over to the cowshed. She was in a talkative mood. Everyone was. Too much so—like people who have something to hide.

"It's only with me that he doesn't seem to be frightened," she said.

Round the bend of the road, all the village was clustered in the darkness round the Ligier's house to witness the young man's departure. To put a good face to it, he made sarcastic remarks to the sergeant and joked with the onlookers, while his wife, who was expecting a baby, wept into her apron.

Gros-Noyer had slipped back into its daily routine. The milking, then the hum of the separator in the dairy by the side of the kitchen, then the family sitting down to supper, the old man putting his pocket knife down beside his plate.

What idea had the gendarme really got at the back of his mind? Was it the same as Etienne Roy had?

It was possible. You come across men now and then who go, for years perhaps, in complete confidence, unaware of the truth that everyone around them knows. The mere idea of such a thing was enough to bring beads of sweat to Etienne's forehead and make his hand shake. . . . After all, hadn't it been the case with his father? Evariste Roy had remained in happy ignorance for years—for two or three years at any rate. He had gone about proudly talking of his son and in the evenings carrying the little fellow on his shoulders. . . . He had bought a new suit for the christening and his moustache had quivered with joy. . . .

Yet all the guests at the christening party, all those people who stuffed themselves with tarts, gulped down the wine, offered him their congratulations, and later on, as they warmed up, gave him hearty slaps on the shoulders—all those people, yes all of them, had *known*.

How Evariste had ultimately found out, he, Etienne, didn't know. By accident, no doubt. From some chance remark made behind his back, or from the tactless joke of someone who'd had too much to drink.

Not that that had any bearing on Etienne's case. He too had beamed with joy at Lucile's christening, and had bought a new suit for her first communion. On the latter occasion they had all three driven over to Fontenay—with Grisette between the shafts—to be photographed.

Yet even then the idea had haunted him. It always had. It was all very well for the doctor to say:

"It's quite common. Babies often come before their time. Particularly the first. . . ."

That birthmark on the child's cheek had always worried him, and more than once, he had woken up with a start, wondering where he had seen one like it before. It was always in his sleep that the question nagged at him. As soon as he opened his eyes it seemed to escape him, to evaporate, and he would go back to sleep trying to recapture the dream that never reached its logical end.

Admittedly there was no sense in all this, any more than there had

been in what the gendarme had been saying. The man upstairs was thirty-three or thirty-four years old, so he couldn't be a son of Joséphine's. But what was he driving at? It was all the gendarme's fault. Why had Liberge deliberately set out to disturb his peace of mind?

Still, there it was! Once you started thinking, you couldn't stop. The man couldn't have been Joséphine's lover either. That was quite impossible. . . . But the fact remained she had tried to hide the bit of paper. It wasn't his imagination—it was in the gendarme's report.

And now those two women had got their heads together and decided to keep the man in the house.

The life histories of three mares. . . .

The first had come to a sudden end, drowned in a ditch, at the age of eight. The second, Grisette, had been sold to a horse butcher, as with advancing years she had become bad-tempered. The last, La Grise, was now kicking against the side of her stall. . . .

Totting them all up, it came to twenty-three years, starting with the fair at La Roche-sur-Yon, and during all those twenty-three years Roy had never quite succeeded in throwing off his misgivings.

They would gradually fade away, then something would crop up to revive them. For instance, there was that day in the middle of winter when all the ditches were frozen over, when the school-mistress had appeared dragging Lucile by the hand, like an unwilling animal, and Lucile's face was hard, almost vicious. She was twelve. She hadn't yet passed her *certificat d'études*. During the mid-morning break she had gone up to one of the other girls, Céline, the cobbler's daughter, a fat placid girl—she had recently died in childbirth after two years of marriage—and had tried to stab her in the back with a great big rusty nail she had picked up in the road.

"Why did you do that?"

"I shan't tell."

"What had Céline done to you?"

"Nothing."

"You might have hurt her very badly."

"I wish I'd killed her!"

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N

Yet Lucile, at twelve, was as quiet and gentle as she was to-day sitting at the kitchen table, her ears pricked for any sound from upstairs, ready to go up the moment her patient made a sound.

"Come on! What did Céline do to you?"

It had needed a great many questions to drag out of her:

"She's a liar."

"What did she say?"

"Nothing."

The schoolmistress would have done better to ask the other girls. They had heard the fat Céline say that Lucile always came to school by a roundabout way so as to pass in front of the workshop of the young cabinet-maker with whom she was in love. . . .

Joséphine Roy, a model wife and the most house-proud woman of Saint-Odile took the incident very calmly, merely observing:

"We'd better send her to a boarding-school."

She was put in a convent school at Fontenay-le-Comte, an expensive place to which went the daughters of the doctors, lawyers, and the wealthier tradesmen of the district. Her mother and father went to see her every Sunday. In her uniform and with her brown hair in two plaits down her back, she remained much the same as ever, if anything a little more distant and reserved.

That had lasted two years. Then one day Etienne Roy had received a letter from the Mother Superior asking him to remove his daughter whose insubordination and irreligious views were detrimental to the good order of the school and the minds of its pupils.

Monsieur,

I regret to inform you . . .

Its chilly politeness had not in the least disconcerted Joséphine.

"So much the worse for you my child. You'll stay at home now. . . ."

And when at fifteen Lucile had one day announced:

"I want to take up shorthand and typing."

Her mother had merely answered:

"Your father'll drive you over to the *École Pigier* to see about it."

He had harnessed La Grise the Second and driven the girl over. He was proud of her, sitting beside him in the *carriole*, for she was pretty.

"Certainly," the *directrice* had said. "She can cycle here like the other country girls, have her dinner here, and cycle back home before it gets dark. We're very particular about that. . . ."

Another period began, and one in which the misgivings were constantly kept alive. It was difficult to say by what. Little hints, little evidences of trickery. He couldn't help suspecting that something was going on underground, and one thing he noticed was that Lucile seemed to be on the look-out for the postman in the morning.

Then:

"I saw your daughter yesterday at Mervent."

"You couldn't have done. She was at the typing school."

"Then it was someone uncommonly like her."

What was going on? Why did people hide things from him? One evening Lucile announced:

"I'm not going to Pigier's any more."

Her mother didn't turn a hair.

"What are you going to do then?"

"Anything. I might go into service. Or stay here and do the milking. Anything you like. . . ."

Said laughingly, but with laughter that was painful to hear and which accorded ill with the rings under her eyes. Next day, without saying anything to his wife, Etienne took La Grise and drove over to Mervent.

"A girl? . . . Dark, you say? . . . No. Unless it's the friend of the young lady in the villa."

A new house which a Paris architect had recently built for himself on the fringe of the forest.

His daughter was a sickly child and the doctor had recommended country air. So she and her mother had been installed in the Forêt de Mervent where the architect joined them for week-ends.

How had Lucile gained admission to the house? Where had she met the architect's daughter?

With his usual mulish obstinacy, Roy had rung the bell. He had waited in a well furnished sitting-room which smelt of roses and oak beams.

"Excuse me, Madame . . . I've heard that my daughter . . ."

Once again he was up against a blank wall. It was his fate.

"You mean Lucile, I suppose. . . . Yes, she used to come here to see my daughter. . . ."

The architect's wife looked away, her hand fidgeting with her white angora shawl.

"I think they must have fallen out. . . . It's wisest not to enquire into children's quarrels. . . . My daughter has to lead a very quiet life. Your Lucile is perhaps a bit too excitable for her. . . ."

Excitable! Lucile! She who at the farm could bury herself in a book for hours at a time and from whom it was always difficult to drag so much as a word!

Etienne couldn't make head or tail of it. He never would. No one was ever to explain to him that Lucile had been in love with the architect, had sought every pretext for coming near him, or, when he was away, of going into his room, helping her friend, for instance, to make his bed.

When he arrived in his car from Paris, he had generally found Lucile on the road and had given her a lift to the house.

Finally, one day when his wife and daughter had gone shopping in Fontenay, he had found Lucile alone in the house with a look in her eye that brooked no misunderstanding.

"Look here, my child . . . Things can't go on like this . . . From now on . . ."

Gently but firmly he had thrown her out, and that night in bed there had been a long whispered conversation between him and his wife.

Etienne Roy might have an uncanny knack of foreseeing disaster, but he could hardly have been expected to guess a thing like that. He remained in ignorance, though with a gnawing conviction that there was more to it than what the architect's wife had told him. Nor could he guess that Lucile had pinched a photograph from the

house which for two years afterwards, in her room at night, she would cover with kisses alternated with curses.

And now in the farm kitchen the meal went on, accompanied by the familiar sound of spoons and forks, the smell of food, the same food that had been served for ages, and the silence, the peculiar silence of *Gros-Noyer*, in which one could almost persuade oneself one could hear the flutter of human thought, as on those serene August nights when one has the feeling that not even an insect could walk unheard.

Etienne was deep in thought. The others too. And not one of them had the faintest idea of what was going on in the other's minds.

What, for instance, was Evariste thinking about, that old man who even now could hardly ever talk to a woman without relapsing into obscenities, the man whom Etienne had always called Father, and still did? As soon as he had finished eating, he got to his feet, straightened his lean angular body, wiped his mouth on his sleeve, and, with a vague *bonsoir* went off to bed, not by the stairs the other used, but by the narrow back stairs which took him to his wretched little room near the apple loft.

What was Joséphine thinking, that woman who had no sooner set foot in the house than she had become one with it and its traditions, like one of those animals which changes colour according to its surroundings?

No one was embarrassed by the silence. It was natural to the place. The only thing that occurred to Etienne to say was:

"What about the rabbits?"

Joséphine looked at her daughter and it was the latter who replied: "The whole litter died."

And Etienne was almost pleased, since his forebodings were justified.

"We'll have to start again," murmured Josephine. "We'd better borrow one of Brichoteau's rabbits this time. . . ."

Brichoteau was the village ironmonger. Roy would go and see him tomorrow about it. At the same time he'd ask for his bill.

Brichoteau was always slow in sending in bills, as with time little details were apt to be forgotten!

With a click the brass weight of the clock suddenly dropped a fraction of an inch. A tooth was missing from the big gear wheel, and the click happened regularly twice a day.

"I think I heard a sound upstairs," said Lucile, jumping up and hastily stuffing her unfolded napkin into its boxwood ring.

She crept softly upstairs, leaving her parents at the table. Etienne was ill at ease alone with Joséphine and after a few moments he muttered something about *La Grise* and went off too.

Outside, the moon had risen, but there was no sign of it except for a bright silver edge to a cloud that had shaped itself into a fair resemblance of Africa.

IV

"I don't say it'll do Ligier any harm, but when it comes to that young wife of his, it's a different story, particularly in the condition she's in. . . . She goes about her work as usual, and then suddenly breaks down and starts crying her eyes out. . . ."

Mme Praud knew all about it, for the previous day she had been to the house to do the washing. To-day she was at *Gros Noyer*, this time for ironing. The kitchen was overheated and there was the usual smell of steamy linen.

"And she isn't strong, either. Never was. . . ."

Mme Praud went on talking as she held up two corners of a sheet while Joséphine Roy took the other two.

They stretched the sheet, folded it twice longways, then several times crossways.

"I don't know what'll happen when the baby comes. . . . I'm sure of one thing—she'll never be able to feed it."

The sheet was stacked with a pile of others and another picked

up. When they advanced to join the ends and then separated for the next fold, they seemed to be dancing a sort of homely minuet.

Was Joséphine Roy listening? That didn't matter. Mme Praud talked when there was anybody there to hear her, whether they listened or no.

The door leading to the staircase was open. Presently Mme Praud went to it, for it was always kept shut, but Joséphine with an unaccustomed asperity snapped at her:

"Leave it as it is. . . ."

Yes, she was listening, but not to Mme Praud. Her neck was constantly craned in the direction of the staircase, while one after the other of the rush-seated chairs received its pile of sheets.

The sky was so low that Saturday afternoon that it seemed to weigh upon the house, though it wasn't actually raining. The dull grey light came from nowhere, making the day seem timeless.

"And that poor man you've got upstairs . . . Is it true he hasn't yet spoken a word?"

Mme Praud was a widow with seven children, five of them still growing, whom she provided for by doing the monthly wash in all the more prosperous houses of the neighbourhood. She arrived first thing in the morning dressed all in black, with an umbrella tucked under her arm and a little black hat perched on her head, for she never went out without a hat. She changed her clothes and set to work. In every house she knew just where everything was and just what she had to do. She wasn't exactly a chatter-box. She talked in a leisurely way, leaving ample pauses between her observations. She was never catty, and never betrayed in one house the little secrets she had learnt in another.

In the evening she went off again with her firm, almost masculine stride. Her house was always tidy, her children clean and well mannered. The eldest was now a schoolmaster at Velluire, the next, a girl, worked in a chemist's shop at Fontenay, while the others did their homework round the kitchen table.

Her husband was never mentioned. What was the point? He hadn't been much good to anybody when he was alive, and when

his health broke down he was only a burden. If no one had said so at his funeral, everyone had thought the same thing.

"It's all for the best. . . ."

Another sheet was ironed and the minuet began again, the linen looking crudely white in the murky light.

"Of course, we all know young Ligier's no good. Yet I can't bring myself to think he'd have stolen the little suitcase. . . . Why shouldn't the man have left it somewhere on his way?"

If Joséphine was still listening for any sounds from upstairs, the words weren't lost on her. For she answered:

"There was a witness."

"A witness of what?"

"The gate-keeper at the level crossing at Fontaines saw him pass, and the suitcase was still there, resting on the handlebars."

The bedroom door opened. Soft steps on the stairs, it was Lucile, who came only half-way down and leant over the bannisters to say in a whisper:

"Shut the door."

Joséphine did as she was asked, but her features hardened. She took another iron from the stove and tested it with a wet finger. Mme Praud, realising that her thoughts were elsewhere, shrugged her shoulders philosophically.

She was neither a happy nor an unhappy woman. To tell the truth she had never had time to consider the question. She placed another pile of unironed sheets on one end of the long table which was covered by an old blanket, brown with many years of ironing.

Etienne had driven over to market once again. He should by now be on his way home. If he'd forgotten the gruyère it would be just too bad, as there wasn't a bit of cheese in the house.

Joséphine was getting impatient. You could tell by the way she brought her iron down with a thud. Finally she put the latter back on the stove and undid her apron strings.

"I'll go up now to relieve Lucile," she said.

Josephine had been unusually tense all the morning, ever since the

doctor had been and had told them the injured man might regain consciousness at any moment.

Mme Praud could see there was something in the air by the way the mother and daughter looked at each other—mistrustfully, jealously.

Joséphine went up slowly, and noiselessly opened the door. On seeing her, Lucile hastily snatched up her book and pretended to be reading.

"I've come to take your place for an hour."

"I'm quite all right. I don't mind staying. . . ."

She didn't insist, however. Leaving her mother in possession, she went downstairs, trying not to show the anger and discomfiture she felt. In the kitchen it was so dark that she switched on the light. Picking up an iron, she took her mother's place, helping Mme Praud.

Yet even Dr. Naullet had noticed that Lucile was the only one who seemed able to calm the patient down. The latter spent most of the time sleeping, but every now and again a shadow crossed his face and his features, indeed his whole body would become tense. Sometimes his eyes would open, sometimes not, but even in the latter case it was impossible not to see that he was in the grip of an almost animal terror.

Then Lucile would take his hand in hers and bend right down over him. If his eyes were shut, he no doubt felt her breath on his cheek. He would blink and raise his head a little, his eyes would seek hers, and when they found them, he would sink back on the pillow pacified.

Perhaps, thought Lucile, she resembled someone he knew.

With Joséphine it was quite different. When she watched at the bedside, she sat stiffly, bolt upright in her chair, staring in front of her, and no one could have guessed what thoughts she was turning over in her mind. One thing was certain—Joséphine did not like the stranger. Lucile, at all events, was convinced of it. In that case why had it been her mother who had been the first to suggest his remaining under their roof? Subsequently she had more than once spoken as though it had been Lucile's idea, but that wasn't true.

"Well, Mademoiselle Lucile? How is he? Has he come to himself yet?"

"Not yet, Madame Praud. . . ."

"There's one thing: he had a stroke of luck in falling into the hands of people like you. . . ."

A line of cows passed in front of the windows, Evariste Roy bringing up the rear. He followed them across the yard into the cowshed. It was now Lucile's turn to show signs of impatience, thumping with her iron just as her mother had done.

"I can't think what's the matter with them to-day," thought Mme Praud, but she was too discreet to say anything.

Lucile put her iron down.

"I'll be back in a minute."

Like her mother she went upstairs without making a sound. Then suddenly she pushed the door wide open.

What she saw made her turn pale and tremble from head to foot.

Her mother had turned her head sharply and composed her features, trying to look natural. In her hand was a little medicine bottle.

"I thought as much," cried Lucile in a harsh voice that was quite strange to her. "That's why you sent me away. . . . What is it? . . . What's in that bottle?"

"What's the matter with you, my child?"

What indeed? The girl was so strung up as to be quite frightening. There was a hard, vicious look on her face. Without thinking of shutting the door, she walked straight up to her mother and snatched the bottle out of her hand.

"So you wanted to kill him! . . . It's true, isn't it?"

"Are you crazy?"

Joséphine thought of Mme Praud, who could easily hear what they said. She went and shut the door.

"This isn't anything the doctor ordered," went on Lucile. "I thought there was something fishy about your coming up here. What has he done to you, anyway? . . . Or are you jealous because I . . ."

Joséphine opened her eyes wide. Nobody had ever seen Lucile like that at home. She was completely out of control, pacing up and down the room in a fury.

"Lucile! . . . Calm yourself. . . ."

Lucile came to a halt in front of her mother. Her lips trembled as though she was going to burst into tears, but it was in an angry, threatening tone that she asked:

"Why were you doing that?"

"I wasn't doing anything. . . ."

"What's in that bottle, then?"

"I don't know. Something the *guérisseur* gave me. . . ."

The *guérisseur*! The quack healer of Fontenay! So it was quite simple after all! For years Joséphine Roy had consulted him on and off, sometimes for herself, sometimes for one of the family, sometimes even for an animal. She had been shopping in Fontenay the day before and had taken the opportunity of going to see him.

Lucile was completely taken aback, the ground cut from under her feet. What had possessed her? How could she have been so stupid?

She turned her head away and stood there awkwardly, not knowing what to do with the bottle in her hand.

"I can't think how you could have got such an idea into your head. . . ."

They couldn't look at each other. It was difficult to get back to their normal relationship. In fact, it would be from now on. Because of this stupid scene, there would always be something between them, something mysterious, disquieting, something they would never be able to have out.

"He said it would help him come round."

Lucile put the bottle on the mantelpiece. All the harshness had gone out of her, her shoulders drooped. Edging towards the door, she just managed to say:

"I'm sorry . . . I'm not quite myself to-day . . . I think it's the weather. . . ."

She was already turning the white enamel handle of the door when her mother stopped her with:

"Wouldn't you like to stay?"

Was it a peace offering, as when one gives a child a sweet? Or had she really something to feel guilty about? Lucile didn't like to say yes.

"You'd better," decided her mother. "You never were any good at ironing."

And a moment later Lucile could hear the rhythmic sound of the two irons and the gentle, rather monotonous voice of Mme Praud.

Without looking at the patient, Lucile went and closed the shutters, first the left-hand one, then the other. Striking a match she lit a wick that was floating on a little pool of oil. Mechanically, she took up her book which she had been at for five days, but hadn't yet finished. It was only when she had sat down and opened it that she glanced towards the bed.

Once again she started. She opened her mouth to cry out, but merely sat there, staring wide-eyed at her patient.

The stranger had woken up. This time he showed no fear. With wide-open eyes he gazed calmly at the girl by his bedside.

Lucile tried to smile. Her eyes were full of tears. She was scared. She had longed for this moment and prayed that it would come when she was alone with him.

Yet now that it had come she was afraid. If she hadn't held herself back, she'd have rushed to the door and called for her mother. She didn't. Instead she tried to say something. It was absurd. The only word she could find to stammer was:

"Monsieur . . ."

He went on looking at her steadily. It was rather uncanny. And the many layers of bandages round his head gave the impression of a turban. He had lost a lot of weight since he had been in bed, and a thin fair stubble covered his cheeks.

She didn't dare take his hand, as she had when he appeared to be suffering. Indeed she hardly dared look at him at all. She was embarrassed? Why? . . . Her book had fallen to the floor. She was afraid it might have attracted her mother's attention. She didn't

want her mother to come up. Frightened as she was, she wanted to stay with him alone.

The man's lips moved but no sound came from them. It was queer, those lips that seemed to be groping in the air as though they had forgotten the use of words.

The man seemed to be surprised too. He tried to raise himself up. That brought her back to life.

"You mustn't move," she said.

His eyes looked questioningly at her as though asking why.

"You must keep quite still. . . . You've been very seriously injured. . . . You're out of danger now, but you've still got to keep very quiet. The doctor said . . ."

He heard. Undoubtedly he heard. But why did he frown? Something seemed to separate them. It was as if he was in another medium, like a fish in a glass tank.

"Would you like something to drink?"

Drink? Did he understand? At any rate he drank obediently when she held the glass to his lips, though only two mouthfuls. The suggestion of a smile passed across his face.

He tried to raise his hand to his head, but it fell limply back on to the bedclothes. He stared at it as it lay there helplessly.

"You'll soon be well again," said Lucile. "You're getting on nicely. . . . Only you mustn't try to do too much."

The man looked hard at her lips and an idea suddenly came into her head. Perhaps the shock had made him deaf.

"Can you hear me?" she asked.

A flicker of response. He heard her. He wasn't deaf.

"Can you understand what I say?"

No response at all. He looked at her blankly. Once again she was seized with panic. Running to the door, she called for her mother.

"Here! Come quick!"

Josephine Roy came running up. Indeed the girl's cry had been so alarming that Mme Praud followed. At first, in the dim light, they could only see Lucile standing by the door. She pointed into the room, however, crying:

"Look! Look! . . ."

The man didn't seem to notice them. Very slowly, with a sort of cautious clumsiness, he thrust a leg out of the bed. He was trying to get up.

It was Mme Praud who ran forward not in the least overawed. In no time she had pushed the leg back under the bedclothes, saying:

"You mustn't do that, *mon bon monsieur*. . . . You'd only hurt yourself. Might do yourself a lot of harm. Just lay quiet. If there's anything you want just say so and we'll get it for you. . . ."

He didn't seem to understand, for he tried to bring the leg out again.

"Now don't go doing that again. You can see for yourself you're too weak. You must stay where you are, it's doctor's orders."

"Mother," said Lucile breathlessly.

"What?"

"Mother. . . . He doesn't understand French."

"There you are!" said Mme Praud, who had settled him down in bed again and arranged his pillow.

Looking after the sick was one of her sidelines, and when anyone died it was always she who laid out the body.

The stranger lay back on the pillow, but he looked at her resentfully like a child that has been slapped.

"Are you thirsty, *mon bon monsieur*?"

"He's just had something to drink."

"Well then, perhaps there's something else he wanted. . . ."

Mme Praud looked round the dimly lit room, then back at the patient, then at Lucile who hadn't yet recovered her self-possession and at Joséphine Roy who stood stock still as though turned to stone.

This was the moment to which Lucile had been looking forward for days, fervently hoping it would find her in charge of the sick-room. It had misfired! The man had recovered consciousness only to show himself incapable of understanding anybody. Perhaps he was an idiot. Yes. That was it. He probably was. An idiot!

"Madame Praud," said Joséphine in a toneless voice, "would you mind going to the post office and telephoning for Dr. Nault." "

"And what if he should try to get up again?"

"Don't bother. We'll see to him."

His eyes followed Mme Praud to the door, and he seemed to be relieved by her departure? He even tried to smile again at Lucile and his lips moved, this time producing faint, indistinct sounds.

"Keep calm, Monsieur," said Joséphine Roy who was not much less upset than her daughter. "Keep calm. We've sent for the doctor."

Mme Praud's footsteps had hardly faded away into the night when the trot of the mare could be heard.

"There's your father come back."

"Shall I ask him to come up?"

"I don't know."

Decidedly neither Lucile nor her mother were up to scratch at that moment, and if the man had tried to get up again it was by no means certain they'd have been able to cope with him. They'd had a turn.

Yet what was it that had rattled them? Was it the man's eyes? They were extraordinary eyes. Gentle. Altogether too gentle—more like those of a dog. And the expression in them. It was difficult to define. It wasn't madness. No. Definitely not. Yet despite their appeal—for they were above all else appealing eyes—there was something missing, a sort of emptiness.

Was it merely that he was bewildered? He seemed all the time to be pleading, to be asking:

"What am I doing here? . . . I can see you are good and kind, not like that awful woman in black who pushed me back into bed. . . . Tell me why I am in this dimly lit room and what you are going to do with me."

He managed to lift his hand to his face. His fingers touched his beard. That seems to puzzle him, for the hand stopped moving.

"You've been injured . . ." began Joséphine, attempting to explain.

She couldn't go on, however. She seemed to have lost her grip. "Call your father," she muttered.

Lucile went to the window, for they could hear the mare below.

"No. Not that way."

Why not? Lucile couldn't help throwing a suspicious look at her mother as she left the room. She dashed downstairs as quickly as she could, called out a few hurried words to her father, then dashed up again, surprised, when she entered the bedroom, to find everything just the same.

Etienne Roy sat down on the stairs to take his boots off before going up. He was a bit redder than on other Saturdays, for he had spent a whole hour at the *Trois Pigeons*, sitting in a corner all by himself, drinking. It was an idea that had suddenly entered his head. For years he hadn't set foot in the place. Fontenay had changed, and with it his habits. He now frequented the *Café des Colonnes*.

He had sat there all alone in his corner.

Now, as he came into the sick-bedroom, he instinctively took off his cap. He looked at the man, then at his wife.

"Oh! Good! . . . *Bonjour Monsieur*. . . ."

What was the matter? Why didn't the chap answer? Why did the two women stare at him as though he'd said something stupid? . . . He turned to Joséphine.

"I thought Lucile said he'd come round. . . ."

"I've sent for the doctor. Madame Praud's telephoning now."

Once again the patient was trying to get up.

"Don't let him, Etienne . . . He mustn't. . . ."

"Do you hear what my wife says? You've got to keep in bed. . . ."

"Put his leg back. . . ."

Etienne did so.

"You needn't be rough with him. . . ."

"Madame!" called Mme Praud from below. "The doctor says he'll be round in a minute. Shall I go on with the sheets?"

As soon as he saw the patient, Dr. Naudet looked surprised, but his only comment was: "There are too many people here."

As the three people moved towards the door, he made a sign to Joséphine.

"Would you mind staying, Madame Roy?"

Once again Lucile was furious. Downstairs, as he looked for his sabots, Etienne asked:

"What happened?"

"I don't quite know. I suddenly saw him looking at me differently. He doesn't seem to understand French."

"I expect he's a foreigner," put in Mme Praud, who was now back at her ironing.

Etienne had to unharness the mare, rub her down, feed and water her. He passed out of the light into the dark, then into the dim light of the stable. As he passed the cowshed, Evariste looked up from his milking to ask:

"What's going on?"

"He's come round."

"What's he say?"

"Nothing."

That was all. Etienne went his way and the old man resumed his milking. Lucile came out too, to feed the rabbit. The bedroom door opened again.

"Madame Praud! Are you there? . . . Would you mind going to telephone again? This time it's for Dr. Berthomé. Fontenay-le-Comte, 118. . . . Tell him Dr. Naudet would like him to come at once."

Madame Praud shrugged her shoulders. She was used to illnesses. The man had woken up! What was there in that to make such a fuss about? She didn't forget her umbrella. With it tucked under her arm she strode off once again into the darkness. At the post office she couldn't help being a little sarcastic.

"It's Fontenay 118 this time. It seems one doctor's not enough. . . . Dr. Berthomé. . . . If you wouldn't mind giving the message for me. I never had much use for those contraptions. . . ."

Three or four times Etienne Roy came in and wandered aimlessly round the kitchen. He wasn't feeling any too good. He'd drunk too much. What's more, he'd thought too much, tucked away in his corner at the *Trois Pigeons* staring at the bar, watching the waitress in the black dress and white apron move from table to table. After all, the place hadn't changed.

He did what he had to do, however, crossing the yard first with a load of straw, then of fodder, for the cows. He heard Dr. Berthomé's high-powered car draw up by the side of the house. There had never been so many comings and goings of doctors at *Gros-Noyer*. It was Mme Praud who let the surgeon in.

"Dr. Naullet's waiting for you. Will you go straight up. . . ."

"What's the matter? Is he worse?"

She shrugged her shoulders. It wasn't for her to say that he'd merely woken up. A faint smile crept over her face when she saw Joséphine come down. The doctors had preferred to be alone, and like her daughter, Joséphine resented her exclusion. Mme Praud was a kindly soul, but she couldn't help being amused by the thought of the mistress of the house being thrown out when she was obviously dying to stay.

"What does Dr. Naullet say about him?"

"You can leave the ironing for to-day, Madame Praud. . . . There's not much left and I can easily finish it off myself on Monday. . . ."

"By all means. . . . Just as you wish. . . ."

Liberge was in the village inn and Mme Praud's two visits to the post office had not been lost on him. Having found out what he could from the postmistress, he jumped on his bicycle, and a minute or two later was standing by the door of the cowshed, where all the family except Joséphine were now gathered, Lucile having joined the men to help with the milking.

"Well, Roy? . . . So it seems the stranger's turned out to be a foreigner. . . ."

Etienne answered with a grunt. Nobody encouraged the gendarme to stay. The latter, however, was quite used to being un-

wanted, and it didn't disconcert him at all. Leaning against the jamb of the door he rolled a cigarette.

Joséphine cleared the kitchen table and laid it for supper, after which she was busy at the stove. Dr. Naulet passed, alone.

"Have you finished?"

"No. I'll be back in a minute."

He was solemn and preoccupied. His car faded away into the distance, returning ten minutes later.

"When Dr. Coutaud comes, show him up, will you?"

Three doctors! What were they doing to the stranger?"

Dr. Coutaud arrived. There was a girl in his car, who might, however, very well have been his daughter. He was a brisk, jerky little man.

"Where are they?" he asked, bustling into the kitchen.

Joséphine had hardly time to throw a glance towards the stairs before he was half-way up. Sounds of voices and laughter. One might have thought they'd forgotten all about the patient.

Joséphine strained the soup through a sieve. She shivered, feeling a draught of cold air. Turning, she saw the door to the yard had been opened noiselessly. Etienne stood on the threshold holding the handle.

He didn't say anything. What had he come for? He merely stood there listening to the sounds from above and looking at his wife. Then without a word he went away.

At eight all the family had come indoors and the separator was humming in the dairy. The doctors were still upstairs. Twice Joséphine had heard what sounded like a cry of pain. It could only come from the patient. What were they doing to him?

They watched the clock. It was supper-time. Had they got to wait for the doctors to go?

The old man set the example by sitting down in his place and opening his knife.

"Shall we start?" asked Joséphine.

As nobody answered, she filled each plate with soup and then sat down herself.

"You didn't forget the gruyere, I hope. . . ."

"I left it in the cart."

"Go and fetch it, will you, Lucile?"

It sounded rather like the congregation coming out of church. A sudden outburst of voices. There were only three of them, but, there being no carpet, the stairs echoed, and they all talked at once. One of them called from the landing:

"Madame Roy."

"Coming."

She went up.

"Someone must stay with him till he goes off to sleep. It won't be long, as he's been given an injection. . . . There's nothing to be afraid of. He's as quiet as a lamb."

They went down, sniffing the good smell of soup. Roy got up from his chair. Lucile looked at them as though they were executioners.

"Well, Roy, it's like this . . ."

Dr. Naulet coughed and gave his colleagues a meaning look.

"I'm afraid it doesn't make things any easier . . . though I must confess I almost expected it. . . . By rights the chap ought to have died. . . ."

"Sit down, won't you, gentlemen?" said Lucile, offering them chairs.

"I mustn't stop," said Dr. Barthomé. "I've another case waiting for me."

"The thing is," went on Dr. Naulet, "our friend upstairs has lost his memory. It's what we call amnesia, but there's no need to bother you with details. . . ."

Roy said nothing. He stood awkwardly, shifting his weight from one leg to the other.

"He hasn't the faintest idea who he is. . . . He's just like a little child. . . . Of course, his memory may come back to him at any moment, but in my opinion . . ."

He looked at his colleagues, especially Dr. Coutaud, who was medical superintendent of an asylum.

"Shock," explained the latter, looking at his gold watch. "And there's no knowing how long it may last. In any case, if he's at all a burden to you, I'm ready to take charge of him whenever you like. You've only got to ring me up. Fontenay 164."

Lucile glanced up at the ceiling. She had heard the bedroom door open and shut. That meant her mother had been listening.

"Now we'll leave you to your supper. . . . Sorry to have disturbed you. . . . Good evening. . . ."

They chatted for a moment outside before getting into their cars. At one moment there was a burst of laughter. A car drove off. Another, whose engine was cold, was started only with difficulty. There was no sound of the third.

Etienne got up and opened the door. He listened. Two men were talking in an undertone. One was Dr. Naulet, and the bicycle leaning against the gate told Roy at once who the other was, even before he caught sight of the narrow silver stripes round the sergeant's *képi*. He shut the door and went back to his place.

So Liberge was snooping again. He had buttonholed Dr. Naulet and it was quite ten minutes before the latter could get away.

Would the gendarme come in to see them? Roy seemed to think he might and his eyes kept reverting to the door as though expecting it to open. It didn't. Evidently Liberge had gone off too.

"If you've finished, you'd better go and take your mother's place."

Lucile went upstairs without a word. Presently Joséphine came down. Her face betrayed nothing.

"What? Haven't you had any cheese?" was all she said.

She went to and fro between the table and the stove, finally sitting down just as the old man shut his pocket-knife with which he had been picking his teeth. He got up.

"*Bonsoir*. . . ."

For him it was another day over. He went out into the yard for five or ten minutes, then went up to bed.

Joséphine and Etienne were left alone. Not for long, however. She was just starting on her supper. He had finished his.

He fidgeted on his chair, hesitated, then got up.

"I'm going to the village," he announced, looking for his cap.

Perhaps, as he made for the door, he hoped she'd say something. He moved slowly, giving her plenty of time. No word came, however. She went on stolidly with her supper. That was how things were at the farm. Everyone following his own train of thought.

Etienne slipped his feet into his sabots and disappeared into the night.

V

The smell of burning candles, hot metal, and blistering enamel paint haunted Joséphine Roy the whole day and even came back to her later, like a faint after-taste, at each appearance of the gendarme, Liberge.

It was All Saints' Day, and before leaving the house in the early morning darkness, she had satisfied herself the stranger was fast asleep. Evariste was already with his cows. Etienne was cutting himself a slice of the ham that hung from the kitchen ceiling.

She hadn't forgotten her box of candles, a blue box with a picture of a red balloon on the label.

At low mass only two lights were burning in the church. A few old women kneeling by the columns. When the service was over they crept out like mice. Day was breaking. Mme Bouin, who had a grocer's shop, was the only one to go straight home. The others turned off to the left and went into the cemetery, crunching the horse-chestnuts under their feet.

It was difficult to count them, dotted about among the tombstones. Perhaps ten or a dozen. They set to work, busily, silently. The others, the men and the children, would be coming later after high mass. And these, the old women, would very likely come back too.

For their present visit was not a ceremonious one. They were too busy arranging their pots of chrysanthemums and tidying up the graves to pay their respects properly to the dead.

One very old woman, whose face was deeply lined, whispered:

"Would you mind lending me your little spade, Madame Pigeanne?"

Once again the silence was complete, except for an occasional cough or the scrape of a rake on some grave. A leaf cast loose from one of the chestnut trees floated gently down through the cold grey air, coming to rest on the medallion of a tombstone.

Joséphine had taken off her black cotton gloves. Two days before, she had been up to the loft to fetch the lantern that was always used on All Saints' Day, a long black lantern with leaded lights which could hold six candles. She had repainted it with the remains of some black enamel that had been used for Etienne's bicycle.

The tombstone, which was in the form of a coffin, bore three names. The first was that of Antoinette Cailleteau who had been snatched from the bosom of her family in her forty-second year. By lung trouble, as a matter of fact. Her husband Eugène Cailleteau had followed her ten years later.

Lastly their daughter, Clémentine Roy, who had expressed the wish to be buried with her parents. Since the vault was only big enough for three, that meant that old Evariste would have to find a resting place elsewhere.

Joséphine struck a fusee and lit the candles one by one. She did it every year on the same day, at the same time and place. And in accordance with custom the old man had been the day before to plant a dozen fine chrysanthemums with large purple flowers.

Joséphine's fingers were cold. She was hungry, as she had had to come fasting to communion. The enamel on the lantern had already begun to blister and give off a pungent smell.

She stood up and made the sign of the cross, then turned to go home. It gave her a slight jolt to find herself suddenly face to face with Liberge who was standing in his uniform only a few paces away along the path.

He touched his hat and fell in by her side as she walked towards the gate, where he had left his bicycle.

"As a matter of fact, Madame Roy, I don't suppose you've got a lot of relations buried here. . . ."

"For that matter, I don't suppose you've any here yourself," she answered tartly.

For Liberge came from the Lenglé marshes over by Velluire.

What was he doing in Saint-Odile on an All Saints' Day? He walked beside her, pushing his bicycle. It looked as though he intended to accompany her all the way home. Madame Bouin, who was just taking down her shutters, looked at them inquisitively, wondering what was on foot.

"I'll have to have a talk with you one of these days . . . I'll drop in some time, when your menfolk are out at work. . . ."

He spoke casually enough. Yet who could tell? Perhaps he had come all the way over from Maillezais just for that! It certainly seemed to be all he had to say then. Passing Ligier's house, he touched his hat again and made for the poultry-dealer's door.

After breakfast the men went up to get into their Sunday clothes. Lucile was already dressed. Joséphine went up to the sick-room, where the stranger, washed and combed, was sitting up in bed.

What on earth had Liberge been driving at? At first he had been constantly hanging about the village, then he had disappeared. This morning he had come on the scene again.

"Are you thirsty?"

The man in bed looked at her with his gentle eyes. He seemed for a moment to be groping, as though it took a little time for the meaning of her words to sink in. Finally he answered with childlike satisfaction:

"Yes."

There was no more talk of his being a foreigner. If his language was very limited it was in perfectly good French.

"Have you had a good night?"

"I don't know. . . ."

He smiled. He was diffident, anxious to please. Joséphine tidied

up the room, then went down with the slop-pail. When she returned, she found his eyes fixed on the door like a faithful dog who has been told to wait for its master in a given place.

He was still incapable of giving them any information about himself. On the whole he was very quiet. Only now and again was he suddenly assailed by some unexplained anxiety. It was at those moments that he invariably tried to get out of bed.

Lucile, who had regained her confidence, was quite at her ease looking after him, and at those moments she could deal with him better than anybody.

What on earth had Liberge been driving at?

Etienne spent the whole day in the *chais*, racking off the wine. In the evening a figure appeared on the road from the village and walked past the house. It looked like Ligier, but, as it was almost dark, it was impossible to be sure.

It was Ligier. His lawyer, by dint of a bit of bluster and pulling a few strings, had finally succeeded in getting him released on bail.

The poultry-dealer reappeared the following day. As he approached the house, it was obvious at a glance that he was a different man to the one they had known. All the jocular and self-assertiveness seemed to have been knocked out of him. There was even a certain diffidence in his manner as he went through the kitchen door, taking off his cap.

"Is your daughter here, Madame Roy?"

"She's upstairs. What did you want?"

"I'd like a word with her, if I might. . . ."

"Lucile! . . . Come down for a moment, will you! . . . Here's Ligier. He wants to see you. . . ."

He stood, waiting respectfully, awkwardly fidgeting with his cap.

"It's about your statement, Mademoiselle. . . . I know the examining magistrate's going to question you again. . . . He'll try and get you to say I stopped. . . ."

"You did. . . ."

"Of course I'm not asking you to perjure yourself. . . . But there

are different ways of saying a thing. . . . I expect you know my wife's expecting a baby. . . . If you could say you're not quite sure—only that, that you're not quite sure. . . . It might make all the difference. You see there are people going about saying that I even picked up the suitcase. . . . What would I have done with it? . . . You know I'm not that sort of a chap. Yet here I am, flung into prison and treated as if I was a criminal. Well! You must do what you think fit, but if you can help me out a bit I'm not the one to forget a good turn. . . .”

His gaze had been slipping, slipping towards the door, and with his last words he bolted, not knowing whether or not he had gained his point.

The men were pulling up carrots. Each day had its appointed task, determined more often than not by the weather. There was little to discuss. A word would suffice. And when a job was undertaken, each knew just what part he was to do and what the other.

“Are we expecting anyone else this morning,” asked Lucile before going back to her patient.

Indeed visitors had become quite a daily occurrence at *Gros-Noyer*. Often there was a car parked beside the house, sometimes two. For one thing, the newspapers were taking up the case. Then there were the doctors. On one occasion yet a fourth had been brought to the house by Dr. Naullet, this time a distinguished specialist from Nantes.

No one took much notice of the Roys. They would barge into the kitchen, saying:

“Can we go up, Madame Roy.”

And without waiting for her answer they would make straight for the stairs.

Few took the trouble to wipe their feet, and some even kept their hats on.

They were as unceremonious in the sick-room, talking amongst themselves, sitting on the edge of the bed, and putting an occasional question to the patient.

They smoked as they discussed the case. When anyone went,

there was no knowing whether he wouldn't be back half an hour later with somebody else. The house wouldn't have been more a centre of interest if they'd dug up a hidden treasure!

Except that the kitchen floor had to be washed more often than usual, life, nevertheless, went on in much the same way. Carrots all day Monday and again all day Tuesday. Joséphine Roy washed them at the pump and did them up in bunches. Etienne took them to Fontenay on Wednesday, which was the day of the *petit marché*.

While he was there, his father, at the farm, started lifting the beetroot. When she had a moment to spare from the animals and the house, Joséphine slipped on her sabots and went to help him. From where they worked, there was nothing to see but hedges and the backs of houses, but Joséphine was none the less constantly looking up, as though she expected to see the gendarme's *képi* at any moment. Once again, however, he kept away from Saint-Odile.

The doctors hummed and hawed and refused to give an opinion one way or the other. Perhaps the patient would recover his memory. It might happen at any moment. Perhaps it never would.

He spoke. He made every effort to understand what was said to him, and when he finally succeeded it seemed to give him a childish delight. He seemed equally delighted when he was able to put together a whole sentence in reply.

Just like a child. A child of four or five, though few children could be so gentle and obedient. As his beard grew, it assumed a slightly reddish tinge, and as the days went past he became more and more like the picture of the *Sacré-Cœur* which hung over the mantelpiece in the Roy's bedroom.

If the work of the farm went on as before, Lucile had to be counted out of it. She no longer even helped with the milking. She spent almost the whole of her days in the sick-room. If the men saw her at all it was only at mealtimes, and even then she wolfed her food so as to get back upstairs as soon as possible. And when her mother relieved her for a spell, she would always, on returning to her post, throw a quick suspicious glance round the room, a glance which her mother pretended not to notice.

The autumn was turning to winter. Chimneys smoked. Doors were kept shut. Children went to school wearing their hooded capes.

In the field the beets lay in a long heap by the side of the ditch. As soon as the track was less muddy, Etienne would bring them in with La Grise and the cart.

To-day he was hoeing the cabbages. Lucile was at Fontenay, where she had been summoned by the examining magistrates. She had gone alone.

"Your father could drive you over."

"I'll do it just as quickly on my bike. . . ."

Joséphine was in the kitchen. The patient was alone, but she had left the bedroom door open and the one at the bottom of the stairs so as to hear if he wanted anything.

It was raining. Etienne, bending over his cabbages, had a sack over his head. Joséphine, after a glance out of the window, had decided to stay in. It was a good opportunity to clear out her cupboards, and their contents were already being stacked on the kitchen table. Evariste was patching up a gap in a fence. A heifer had broken through it and fallen into the ditch on the other side. If the latter had been any deeper she'd have been drowned.

Liberge came spinning into the yard and jumped off his bicycle. He knocked on the kitchen door, but turned the handle without waiting for an answer. At the sight of him, a whiff of burning paint, was wafted, as it were, through Joséphine's mind.

"I thought I'd find you alone, Madame Roy. . . . Your daughter's gone over to Fontenay, hasn't she? . . . Is it true that wretched skunk, Ligier, tried to persuade her to give false evidence?"

"I don't know. . . ."

"He came here, didn't he?"

"It's quite possible. But you could hardly expect me to notice a thing like that. By the way people come and go, you might think this was a railway station!"

She deliberately refrained from offering him a chair. He nevertheless sat down astride of one and leant over the back, tilting his *képi* on to the back of his head.

Liberge was still young. He had three children, the last only a baby. He was quite a good-looking man, with a faintly mocking expression on his face.

"When I questioned you the other day—on the day of the accident that is—there were one or two things we didn't go into. . . ."

She glanced at the door to the staircase, but there was no sound from upstairs.

"*Joséphine Roy, née Violet*—that's what you said, wasn't it? . . . Now, listen to this. . . ."

Slowly he took his little notebook from his pocket and removed the elastic band. With a slowness that was deliberately exaggerated, he turned over the pages.

"*Violet*. . . Here we are! . . . You can go on with your work, Madame Roy. There's no reason why we shouldn't talk at the same time. . . . *Augustine Violet, née Caillol*. . . That's your mother, isn't it?"

He pretended not to look at her, so as to put her at her ease, but he none the less kept her under observation out of the corner of his eye. He seemed more pleased with himself than ever.

"Well?" she said. "What of it?"

"Hum! . . . That's just what I thought. . . . Not that it's of any importance. . . . You know, in our line of business we're supposed to know who people are and where they come from. You understand, don't you? . . . It comes in handy sometimes. . . . And as for this *Augustine Caillol*. . . . Wait a minute while I look at my notes. . . . Oh, yes! She married *Violet* when she was eighteen. *Eugène Violet*, shipmaster, of Marseilles. . . . She had a son by him called *Justin*. Then her husband left her—or it may be she left him—but she went on calling herself *Madame Violet*. . . . We find traces of her at Toulon three years later, travelling around with a band of gipsies. . . ."

Outwardly *Joséphine Roy* remained calm and dignified. It would have been difficult to put an age to her. For years now she had worn the plain, sombre clothes of the peasantry. Her hair was almost white at the temples. Her features were regular, firm, and even a little

hard. All the same, when you looked at her, you felt there was still something young about her. There was a gleam of life in her eyes.

"You were born at . . . Let me see . . ."

"At Montauban," she said curtly.

"That's it. At Montauban. At that time Violet was already dead. Most likely she knew nothing about it, as he died in a hospital in Algiers. Of typhoid. Seems there was an outbreak of it. . . . As for who your real father was . . ."

As she stood in front of the gendarme she had the same rigidity you see in the enlarged photographs of parents and grandparents that hang in nearly every farm house in the country.

"Do you know if your mother's still living?"

She didn't say either yes or no. She hadn't gone on with her work as Liberge had suggested. She simply stood there, her hands clasped in front of her, her face colourless, her lips drawn.

"*Augustine Violet. . . . Here, I've got it. . . . She's living at present in a hut on the outskirts of Saint-Ouen where she's generally referred to as La Mère aux Chats. . . . She certainly seems to have had quite a lot of kittens! Not far short of a dozen, though there's precious little trace of them now. Some died. Most of the others disappeared. . . . Two months for causing a breach of peace and insulting behaviour to the police. First offence. Sentence suspended. One month for . . .*"

"I know."

"It's quite a long list. . . . With her horde of children she left the Montauban-Toulouse region and moved to Nantes. . . . The band she had been with was pretty well dispersed, but three or four families stuck together, living all in a heap, so you could hardly tell one from the other. . . . They did the fairs all over the Vendée. So you seem in your young days to have had quite a wandering life."

What was the use of answering him? It was true, and he knew it was.

Liberge put his notebook back in his pocket, a little disappointed. He had expected her to make a scene. At last he looked squarely at her. She was still standing motionless, as in a photograph.

"Well! There we are! . . . And Etienne Roy married you and brought you here. . . ."

He got up. He hadn't been offered the refreshment that was customary at a visit, particularly when it was a gendarme.

"When a case isn't quite clear, you have to go on looking. You can see that, can't you? And you've got to look into every corner. . . ."

She looked away. Etienne had appeared in the yard. He saw the bicycle. He hesitated, then, with a frown on his face, made for the door and roughly threw it open. By the scowl on his face you might have thought he'd surprised his wife and Liberge in a guilty posture.

"What's going on?" he growled.

"Hallo, Roy! . . . I was passing this way and thought I'd just drop in. You see . . ."

But Joséphine interrupted him.

"The sergeant has been reading me a report on my family. It seems they've been delving into my mother's past. He's got a list that long of all the times she's been convicted."

Roy stared blankly at them, at a loss to understand. Liberge was embarrassed.

"Don't think I'm trying to make trouble, Roy. . . . It's my job, you know. . . . We can't get away from the fact that the stranger upstairs had the address of this farm in his pocket. . . . That must mean something. I'm trying to find out what. . . ."

Etienne automatically took two glasses out of the cupboard, and put them on the one corner of the table that was not encumbered. Then he fetched a *chopine* of wine.

"Suppose the chap never does get back into his right mind. . . . We'll have to find out somehow who he is, if only because of the money. . . . Sixty thousand francs, you know. . . . And for all we can tell there may have been more in the suitcase."

"Here's luck, Sergeant. . . ."

He drained his glass of all but the last few drops, which he emptied on to the floor.

"Perhaps your wife's mother—seeing as she's still alive—might be able to . . ."

He wasn't mistaken. Etienne was surprised.

"I hope I'm not being indiscreet. . . ."

"Not at all. Go on. . . ."

"You see, on your side there's no mystery. Everybody knows all about the Roys and the Cailleteaus. Those that aren't living are lying in the Saint-Odile cemetery and you can read their names on the tombstones. . . . To tell the truth, it was the cemetery that set me thinking. When I saw your wife there on All Saints' Day, I said to myself: 'You won't find many Violets buried in Saint-Odile nor anywhere else in this part of the country! . . . Then when I found out she'd had a host of brothers and sisters . . . And always on the move, of course, so that nobody knows what's become of them. . . . Not that that's anything against them. . . .'"

A sound from upstairs.

"You'll excuse me, won't you?"

Joséphine hurried upstairs, holding up her skirt. The two men were left alone. Etienne filled up the glasses again.

"Apart from all this business, how are things going, Roy?"

Silence.

"Got the beet in yet?"

But he wasn't thinking about the beet at all. He eyed Roy narrowly. He was pleased with what he had done. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, put his *képi* straight, and made for the door. As he opened it, he was greeted by a sudden downpour of rain, but that didn't seem to bother him.

"Well! . . . I must be getting back to Maillezais. . . . Let's hope the chap upstairs will find his tongue one of these days. . . ."

Left alone in the kitchen, Etienne stood listening.

He almost expected to hear the sound of sobbing. Perhaps he even hoped for it. Just now, when he had come in from the yard, he had received a shock. He couldn't explain it, but what he had seen had got under his skin—Joséphine standing there, dignified yet defenceless, white as a sheet, and that gendarme who seemed to take pleasure in torturing her. . . .

He had pitied her. It was a fact. And it wasn't for the first time.

Sometimes at night in bed, he had resisted the impulse to take her hand.

What should he have said to her?

"Tell me the truth, Joséphine. . . . Let's have it out. . . . Is Lucile really . . . ?"

He hadn't dared. The days had succeeded each other, the seasons, the harvests. Side by side they had lain in bed at night, side by side in the muddy fields they had pulled up the carrots or planted cabbages.

A sort of giddiness came over him. His head swam and his body swayed slightly, as though he'd had too much to drink. He shut his eyes.

Suppose it wasn't true? . . . Suppose Lucile really was his child after all? . . . The idea was no sooner entertained, however, than he remembered the bit of paper picked up from the floor and hidden in the hollow of her hand. He hadn't invented it—it was in the gendarme's report.

Liberge had gone off just now with a self-satisfied smile on his face. Roy had seen it. A nasty smile. But, when it came to that, Liberge was a nasty bit of work himself. He had had that self-same smile on his face when he'd gone to arrest Ligier. Though of course he had tried to cover himself with profuse apologies. . . . He was like that. A chap who was always sniffing around. Always for bad smells, of course!

"No. You must stay in your chair."

Joséphine articulated each word perfectly as though speaking to someone who doesn't quite understand the language. Yesterday had been the first day on which the patient had been allowed out of bed, to sit for an hour or two in the armchair in which Etienne's mother had spent most of the last years of her life. Every evening she had had to be carried back to her bed like a lifeless mass. If she had been left alone she wouldn't even have been able to call for help, yet right to the end her eyes had been full of life, terribly so, and she had seemed to understand all that went on around her.

Why did Joséphine go from the sick-room into her bedroom?

She was only there a minute. Then she came down. Had she cried and gone there to efface the traces?

There was no sign of it.

"He keeps on wanting to get up and look out of the window," she remarked.

She emptied a pail of dirty water and filled it again at the scullery pump. She looked round for her duster.

When Etienne had told his father he was going to get married, the latter had asked:

"Who to?"

"No one from these parts. . . . Her parents were fair people. . . ."

Fair people. He hadn't said gipsies. The old man hadn't raised any objection. Hadn't he cared? Did he really regard himself as an outsider in that house?

What did he think? After all, he couldn't help thinking something. Everyone had his thoughts. Joséphine too was thinking, as she scrubbed a cupboard shelf.

He could think of nothing better to say than:

"Isn't Lucile back yet?"

As though he couldn't see! If she had been back, she'd have been with her precious patient and Joséphine wouldn't have had to go up to see to him. What's more the door to the staircase wouldn't have been left open. Lucile would have seen to that.

"Not yet."

They were rarely alone in a room together—that is, during the day. They were quite close to each other. He could have touched her. He could have. . . .

Once again he had the agonising feeling that only a word was needed, or merely a gesture and everything would be put straight.

Yet at the same time he had the feeling that that was just what she dreaded. She was tense, holding herself in, waiting for him to go away.

He dragged his sabots across the kitchen tiles, for he hadn't taken them off when he came in, and there were wet footprints all over the place.

"I must be getting on with my . . ."

He didn't finish his sentence. He didn't really know where he was going. It wasn't worth while going back to his cabbages before dinner.

He went out and shut the door behind him. The downpour had been brief, giving place to a steady drizzle. Not knowing what to do with himself, he wandered into the stable, where La Grise looked up expectantly, thinking he had come to harness her.

Confused thoughts, though with one uppermost. Joséphine had lied to him. Ten years ago she had told him her mother was dead. She had received a letter, which, however, she had not shown him.

"It's from one of my brothers," she had said.

She had lied. He couldn't help resenting it, though he had to admit that she had probably only done so to avoid worrying him. She had acted, so to speak, out of respect for *Gros-Noyer*.

No woman he had ever known had had such respect for her husband's house.

How many other women were there not who still after having two or three children, dolled themselves up as though they had not yet renounced cutting a dash in the world? How many whose eyes brightened in male company, and about whom stories were told in the cafés?

Did their husbands know of their goings-on? Some, like Massiot for instance, could hardly be blind. Yet Massiot was the first to bandy jokes on the subject. After a glass or two of wine, he was given to say:

"A man and a man, that makes two. Two men and a woman, that makes a fool of one of them!"

Massiot had children and was proud of them all. That's what Etienne couldn't understand. How could a man swallow *that*?

Yet there were long periods in Etienne's life when he was not unhappy. He ploughed and sowed, he hoed and reaped, he harnessed his mare to drive to market. If he returned to the burning subject from time to time, it was to answer himself:

"Go on! . . . It's all nonsense. . . ."

Then suddenly one day he would look at Joséphine or at Lucile. He would gaze at them as though they were strangers. And all his doubts would flood back into his mind. He would sidle about the place with his head on one side, peering at people out of the corner of his eye.

Some hinges creaked. That was the old man opening the toolshed to put away his tools and the wire he had used.

The church bell rung. A gust of wind brought down a shower of fluttering leaves. Etienne was hardly conscious of leaning with his back against La Grise till gradually her warmth went through his wet clothes.

A bicycle. Lucile in her best dress and overcoat and a new hat she'd bought for the winter.

Bursting into the kitchen, she asked at once:

"Has he been all right?"

"On the whole. Once he wanted to get up and look out of the window. . . . Lay the table, will you? . . . What did the magistrate say?"

"Nothing. Nothing new, that is. . . ."

"And Ligier?"

"He was brought in towards the end. He swears he slowed down, but didn't stop. It isn't true. . . ."

"Did you say so?"

"Yes."

The tablecloth. Plates decorated with coloured flowers.

"Has he had anything to eat?"

"A little."

"Aren't the men in yet?"

"I expect they're in the yard."

The sort of conversation that was usual at *Gros-Noyer*.

"I'll go up and change."

"Be quick, then."

To go and see her patient of course! And she wouldn't be at all displeased to let him see her in her best clothes. She talked to him as people do to foreigners.

"I've been to town . . . Town . . . Lots of houses . . . Streets . . . On my bicycle . . . Bicycle . . ."

She moved her hands as though pedalling and he smiled back at her.

"Dinner? . . . Did she give you something nice?"

He answered:

"Nice. . . . Yes. . . ."

Joséphine threw the cutlets into the smoking frying-pan. Opening the door a few inches, she shouted out into the yard:

"Dinner."

Then hurried back to the stove.

A smell of candles and burning paint . . . the sergeant had certainly been enjoying himself. She looked at the rush-seated chair and could almost persuade herself he was still sitting astride of it with his notebook in his hand, that horrid little notebook which he held over her like a sword and which he tried to make her believe was full of dreadful secrets.

He was proud of himself. He was doing his stuff. He wanted a pat on the back. He wanted people to say:

"Just think of it! It was an ordinary sergeant of the *gendarmérie* who solved the mystery!"

Perhaps he even hoped for promotion.

Yet he didn't understand. He didn't understand a thing, certainly not what he was doing. Even if he had realised the trouble he was stirring up, what would he have cared?

He'd be back again before long. Of course he would. He thought he'd picked up a scent and that he was the only person smart enough to follow it up.

"Are you ready, Lucile?"

"I'll be down in a moment."

She could be heard overhead, hurriedly changing her clothes. Of the men, Evariste was the first to appear, sauntering across the yard with his long slow stride. He came in, leaving his sabots by the door. Etienne came out of the stable. The soup tureen stood steaming in the middle of the table, and a huge hunk of bread lay by the side of each plate.

How Liberge had smacked his lips over the delinquencies of Augustine Violet otherwise known as *La Mère aux Chats!* . . .

They all sat down except Joséphine and once again the old man took out his pocket knife. Joséphine stood, the ladle in her hand, serving the soup as she always did, though her eyes were far away. When everyone was helped, she sat down too.

If Etienne's parents had taken the matter in hand, would they ever have been able to find him a wife like that?

VI

For the ploughing and sowing of the big field on the other side of the road, two labourers had been taken on temporarily, the same two that were always engaged when help was needed, the Chaillou brothers of Saint-Pierre-le-Vieux. They would of course be having dinner with the family. Joséphine Roy decided to get some mussels, it being the day when old Mme Sareau, who dealt in them, received her supplies. They were bothersome things to prepare, as they needed so much washing, but they provided a good substantial dish for the men. She undid her apron, took her purse and her string bag.

She hadn't more than three hundred yards to go to reach the village. No sooner was she round the bend than she caught sight of Mme Sareau—the woman who had made a statement implicating Ligier—who was standing with her barrow of mussels in front of the post office.

Passing Mme Bouin's, she remembered she was getting short of sugar and had some pears to stew. She went into the shop and Mme Bouin came out of the kitchen behind, where she had been washing her little boy.

"Two kilos of sugar, please."

Joséphine glanced out of the window. Over the jars of sweets, she saw the postman jump on his bicycle and ride off towards Gros-

Noyer. She opened the door and called to him. Too late, however. He didn't hear her.

"There you are, Madame Roy. . . . And how's he getting on, your amnesia case, as they call him in the papers?"

Joséphine paid, bought her mussels, and carrying her load, started towards the farm. A bus passed going in the opposite direction, but she hardly noticed it. She couldn't have said herself what she was thinking about. She felt washed out this morning, her mind as dull as the grey sky above. All the same her lips moved, which proved she was talking to herself.

Opening the door to the kitchen, she recoiled, almost as though she had gone to the wrong house. Three people were in the kitchen, a man and two women. They all stood up as she entered.

"Madame Roy?" enquired the man, who was about forty years of age. "I hope you'll excuse us. It was the young lady upstairs who called to us out of the window. She told us to come in and wait for you. We came over in the bus. . . ."

The moment she arrived, Joséphine had seen the post lying on the table. There, in its familiar wrapper, was the monthly journal of the *Syndicat Agricole*. By it lay a picture postcard. It was one of those inordinately shiny ones in the worst possible taste. It depicted a pink-checked young man smiling effusively as he held out a bouquet. It was dirty and yellow with age, and the varnish was cracked. Who could have sent it?

Joséphine turned it over. Her name and address were written in a shaky handwriting which she recognised at once. On the left, in the part reserved for correspondence was nothing, not even a signature, nothing but a sign made by two vertical lines crossed by two horizontal ones.

"These two ladies have come from Fumay in the Ardennes. . . ."

Joséphine Roy had slipped the postcard into her bodice. Who had put it on the table? The postman often walked straight in when there was no one about. On the other hand Etienne might easily have been in the yard when he came. Or Lucile might have come downstairs for a moment.

Photographs of the unknown man—both with and without his beard—had now appeared in newspapers all over the country. Even the big Paris papers were taking an interest in the case. Since he had no name, they called him *the Saint-Odile amnesia case*.

"These ladies," went on the visitor, "or rather this lady. . . ."

Joséphine looked keenly at them. They were the first to come forward to say they recognised the man. Not the last, however! There would be plenty more!

The mother was short, thick, and bony, dressed all in black, and, like Mme Praud, carrying an umbrella. Everything about her looked somehow aggressive, and even the little hat perched on her head succeeded in looking like a bastion. With the ferrule of the umbrella she kept prodding her daughter to bring her up to scratch.

"My daughter, Madame Boumal, is quite certain of recognising her husband," she affirmed desperately. "Where is he?"

The daughter was about thirty. She was white as a candle with a circle of red plastered on each cheek. Her hair was of no particular colour. She had one shoulder higher than the other, and a poor little bosom under an acid green blouse.

She had taken out her handkerchief and was whimpering:

"Poor Hubert! . . . Poor Hubert! . . ."

They had left Fumay three days before, for in the first place they had been to the *Sûreté* in Paris, heaven knows why. Perhaps because they were mistrustful and afraid of getting a cool reception from the local police.

"At the *Sûreté*, we saw the director himself. It was he who showed us the photos, which were so much clearer than the ones in the papers. They left no doubt in my daughter's mind. It was Hubert Boumal all right, his forehead and his chin, and above all the expression in the eyes. . . ."

The detective from Fontenay who had accompanied them listened patiently. Upstairs Lucile must be leaning over the bannisters. Her mother was sure of it.

"Would you like to come up?"

As far as Joséphine was concerned, these women from Fumey

couldn't have chosen a worse moment to appear. Her head was swimming, she hardly knew what she was doing, and when she stumbled over one of the stairs she apologised awkwardly.

The old lady hadn't taken off her grey cotton gloves. The daughter stammered:

"I'm frightened, Mother."

"Come on, Juliette. There's nothing to be afraid of."

There was no doubt about it: Lucile knew very well what they'd come for. She stood behind the patient with her back against the wall, glaring at the intruders, ready to fight tooth and nail for her property.

"Is that him?"

In his armchair, the stranger gazed with some alarm at the visitors, then looked round for Lucile. Mme Boumal was sobbing into her handkerchief.

"Well?" asked the detective. "Is that your husband?"

Once again the mother used her umbrella as a goad. No doubt she had ordered her daughter to recognise the man at all costs. After all he had sixty thousand francs in his pocket, hadn't he? And a man who carries that much about with him can be counted on to have a good deal more.

"Do you recognise him?"

"I'm not sure . . . I . . ."

"It's the beard," explained the old woman. "You see, Hubert never had one. . . ."

Lucile's eyes were like two gimlets. If that old hag thought they were going to shave the stranger's face for her. . . .

But of all the people there, it was Joséphine, the serene and dignified Joséphine, who was the most upset. She could feel the postcard on her breast. It had a Paris postmark. The writing was her mother's.

She had never written before. It had been agreed between them that she wasn't to. If she did so now, it was no doubt because she had read the papers and seen the photographs.

But it was the little sign on the left hand side that had made the blood rush to Joséphine's head. For that sign was a message in itself.

It was engraved on her memory along with other recollections of childhood such as the smell of calico as they unloaded their cart in some market place.

That sign was a danger signal. It was used by gipsies—or at any rate the ones she had known. They used to chalk it up anywhere, on the wall of a house, on a packing-case or a stall. It meant: Look out! . . . Watch your step! . . .

It wasn't the moment to charge an exorbitant price or give the wrong change, still less to pick anybody's pocket.

The young woman in green could hardly bring herself to look at her putative husband. For his part he was quite unable to grasp what was going on or understand the sobs with which the performance was punctuated. Sometimes they died away, only to start afresh each time she shot a furtive glance at the bearded face in front of her. Giving her up, the detective turned to her mother.

"What did your son-in-law do?"

"He was a miner."

The detective looked surprised, and looking at the patient's clean white hands she sought to repair her blunder by adding:

"Not coal-mines. Slate mines. . . ."

"You're sure it's him?"

"My daughter can vouch for it better than I can. . . . It's over ten years since he went. . . ."

"Went? How do you mean?"

"He just went off . . . Like that! . . . Two days after the wedding. . . . It was a Sunday and we thought he'd gone off to the *estaminet* for a game of skittles. . . . Then when he didn't come back . . ."

"Did he take anything with him?"

"The money!"

"And since then you haven't heard from him?"

"Not a word. Not a sign of him till suddenly we saw that photo—the one where he's clean-shaven."

The detective tried the daughter again.

"Tell me, Madame . . . had your husband any distinctive mark on his body?"

She didn't seem to understand. With her head on one side and one shoulder higher than the other, she stared blankly back at him. The mother came to her rescue.

"You don't suppose they did, you know what I mean, in broad daylight, do you?"

Lucile couldn't help smiling, a sour smile though it was. Joséphine heard, but the words hardly seemed to sink in.

"Really, Madame Boumal, I must ask you to say whether that's your husband or not."

A prod with the umbrella.

"I don't know . . . I think it is. . . . It's certainly like him. . . . And yet . . ."

"Try speaking to him. Perhaps that'll revive his memory."

"What shall I say to him?"

"Whatever you like."

"Hubert! . . . Hubert! . . . Don't you know me? . . . You needn't be afraid. If you come back to me now I won't blame you for what's happened. . . . I know you weren't ever quite normal. . . ."

She blew her nose, which looked even redder than it was against her white face.

"Hubert! . . . Say something. . . ."

But all Hubert could do was to look round for Lucile. He was bewildered and she was the only person who could help him. This time he found her. The old woman had followed his look. She smiled vindictively.

That girl! Of course! . . . These peasants know how to feather their nests. They've a fine house and a herd of cows and a row of copper saucepans in the kitchen that could make any woman envious. . . . People like that don't let go of sixty thousand francs if they can help it!

She adopted a sarcastic tone to say:

"If he came home with us, he'd soon recognise the place, but I can well understand that the people here will never let him go!"

"Well, Madame, if only your daughter would say definitely. . . ."

"How can you expect her to? Can't you see she's upset, to say

nothing of being worn out by all the travelling she's done since we left Fumay. . . . But if she can't recognise him there are plenty of people at home that can! . . . I'll bring them here. I will, if I have to pay their fares! . . . Come on, Juliette, we're wasting our time. . . ."

"I'm afraid what you tell us about Hubert Boumal hardly corresponds to what we know of this man. . . ."

"Juliette! . . . Come on!"

Holding her umbrella threateningly she stumped out of the room, down the stairs, and across the kitchen, not a detail of which escaped her. These moneyed people!

The daughter followed, then the detective, who turned back towards Joséphine Roy and shrugged his shoulders, as much as to say:

"It's not my fault!"

With a curt goodbye, the old woman swept out of the house, and a few minutes later disappeared with her daughter round the bend of the road. There was no bus back till five o'clock in the afternoon, so they'd have to kick their heels in Saint-Odile all day and eat at the village inn. The detective did better, cadging a lift from a passing lorry that was heading for Fontenay.

Joséphine set to work on the mussels, scraping them, then throwing them into an enamel pail. She had put on an overall of coarse blue linen. A stew simmered on the corner of the stove.

Never before had she been assailed by such anxiety, by a feeling of such utter insecurity. She looked round her at the warm, friendly kitchen. It should have been comforting, but nothing could comfort her now.

The cock might crow in the farm-yard, the hens cluck as they pecked at the ground round the dunghill, the pigeons coo on the roof of the barn. . . . It was no use. It seemed to her that at any moment her whole world might come tumbling about her ears.

She had an oppressive feeling in her chest which made it almost difficult to breathe. But her hands went on working automatically.

What had her mother meant? She wasn't quite like other women. Some thought she was really a little bit cracked. When she was

taken to the police station for any reason, the police always prolonged the business as long as possible, finding her as good as a play.

She entered into the spirit of it, and always saw that they got their moneysworth. For all that, she had her head screwed on the right way. She knew very well why Joséphine had married a farmer. She knew that she pretended her mother was dead, and knew the reason for that too.

Joséphine had had enough of travelling from fair to fair, from market to market, always on the go, sometimes in a cart, sometimes in a third class railway carriage, but always higgledy-piggledy in a crowd—old people with their coughs, children with their belly aches.

The old woman, *La Mère aux Chats* didn't cough, but she had twice been operated on. By rights she should have yet another operation, but she refused. What was the use? At her age! She hadn't that long, and might just as well drag herself round as she was.

"Your papers. . . ."

There was always a policeman about who had nothing better to do than ask for your papers!

"Come along with me. . . ."

Even when you'd done nothing, it meant waiting for hours, answering a lot of silly questions, and as likely as not having to sleep in the lock-up.

"Get along now, and don't let me catch you again. . . ."

Of course you got used to it in time. Augustine Violet did, anyhow. Even when Joséphine used to send her money—as she did during the first years of her marriage—she hadn't been able to change her mode of life.

As for Justin, the eldest of her children, no one knew what had become of him. He had thought it wisest to make himself scarce after a pitched battle with some other "fair people," the Poitiers band. The latter were led by a man called Le Tatoué because he was tattooed all over his body. It had been some fight!

What on earth had possessed Le Tatoué to bring his people to La Roche? It was a blatant case of poaching, since it had always been

an understood thing that the place belonged to the Nantes band. Had they had trouble in their own sector and been driven to seek fresh pastures? However that may be their coming was a challenge. They arrived dirty and vociferous as usual, and bagged the best places in the market. Justin had a word with them, but they merely sneered at him.

The day passed off without any great damage being done. It was a September fair, always a good one, as the peasants had their pockets full. A few insults were exchanged, but that was all.

Not content with that, the Poitiers band went on looking for trouble. Justin and his people, including the women, were sitting quietly in the back room of the *Chêne Vert*, when the others barged in. More insults. And suddenly it flared up into a fight. Someone picked a bottle up by the neck and hurled it across the room. Some said it was Justin, others that it wasn't.

It had no doubt been aimed at Le Tatoué. Missing him, it caught one of his women, for he had two, two sisters, both with red hair and as covered with fleas the one as the other.

She went down like a ninepin, moaning:

"He's killed me! . . ."

It was true. She didn't die at once, but the same night in the hospital. Whether it was his doing or not, Justin wasn't going to stop to argue it out. A word of farewell to his mother, and he was off.

Yes, Joséphine had been quite right to get away from it all. She wasn't made for that kind of life. Not that she ever complained. She said nothing. But at her stall she would stand as cold and reserved as a statue, which wasn't exactly the best way to do business.

One day when one of the men in the band had made a pass at her, she had looked him straight in the eye, merely saying:

"What's the matter with you, Victor? Have you taken leave of your senses?"

For a whole week after the fight there had been trouble with the police. Any amount of trouble. But Justin was well out of the way and in the end it had come to nothing. All the same, the band had

thought fit to disperse for a while, and Joséphine had jumped at the opportunity of getting away. She had made for Fontenay-le-Comte, where no one knew her, and gone into service at the *Trois Pigeons*.

It was from there that she had written to her mother:

I'm getting married to a farmer round here. It's quite time I settled down. I shall be able to send you some money from time to time, but it would be better for everybody if you didn't try to see me.

Years later, in Fontenay on market day, she had run into Victor again, the one who had tried to have a bit of fun with her. She had made a little sign to him, and while she pretended to be choosing some lace, she whispered:

"Where's Mother now?"

"In Paris. . . . I saw her last week. . . ."

"I've told my husband she's dead. . . . He's the worrying sort, always on the look-out for trouble. . . ."

Once again Joséphine was right. At least her mother thought so. She understood perfectly. A husband, a house, money . . . There was no point in risking those things for a bit of family sentiment. They weren't the things she set much store by herself, but it was good to know her daughter had got what she wanted.

Later on, when she heard her granddaughter was in a convent school, she accepted that too with the same philosophy.

And now she had suddenly sent her daughter that message.

Danger! . . . Look out! . . .

If danger there was, she was the person to know! She had always had an unerring flair for it. And it came at a moment when Joséphine was already a prey to misgiving. If only she and Etienne could have been perfectly frank with each other. That, however, had never been possible. There was too much in her background which she wished to forget, enough in his to make him guarded and suspicious even at the best moments.

It was too late to do anything about it. That was the sort of rut you could never get out of. In everything else, she had done all a woman could. Not only had she been a model housewife, but for years she had waited on Etienne's mother hand and foot, dressing

and undressing her, feeding her and all the rest, and it was she who, aided by the inevitable Mme Praud, had finally on a winter night laid the old woman out.

There wasn't a single reproach that could decently be levelled at her. Not one. The farmhouse had never been kept so well. She saw to everything and yet found time to keep herself clean and tidy.

As for men . . . Not a breath of suspicion of anything in that quarter. Not even in jest could such a thing be hinted at. Of how many other women in Saint-Odile could that be said? Not very many, leaving out the ugly ones, who didn't run into temptation.

"Yet one day I suppose I'll find myself on the road again. . . ."

That was a thought that had haunted her for twenty years. The pinch of want would grip her by the throat and bring beads of sweat out on her temples.

No! Never! She knew what it was!

Yet who could tell what might not happen?

She got to her feet mechanically and went and shook her apron out into the yard. She put her pail of mussels under the pump and washed them, changing the water three times. Then standing over a saucepan, she cut up a few carrots and two big onions, adding a sprig of parsley.

"I don't mind betting they come back again," said a voice behind her.

Joséphine started. Lucile had a nasty way of creeping downstairs and coming upon her unawares.

"He's certainly not her husband," she went on, as she got a tray ready for her patient.

Though startled by her presence, Joséphine hardly heard what her daughter said. Her mind was engrossed by other things. There was only one person who could possibly. . . .

And her thoughts went back to a bright September morning when the air was as fresh as wine, and a young Joséphine with bare legs and dishevelled hair was taking down the shutters of the *Trois Pigeons*. Someone whistled at the corner of the street. Looking round

she recognised one of the band, a mere boy of eighteen, whose curly hair had won him the nickname *Le Frisé*!

He too had made off after the battle. The police had decided that it was either he or Justin who had thrown the bottle and were looking for both.

She stood stock still for a moment, holding a shutter, making up her mind. It was a fatal decision. In the end she dropped the shutter and ran to the corner.

"They'll get me," said *Le Frisé*, struggling to put a brave face on it though he was trembling all over.

"Why don't you get right away?"

"I've no money."

"Neither have I."

They had tucked themselves away behind the *Poissonnerie* in the *Place du Commerce*. A few yards away, ducks were splashing about in the River Vendée.

"If only you could hide me for a day or two. . . ."

The inn-keeper called. She had just time to say:

"Come back after dark. . . ."

"You're sure? . . . If not I'd rather give myself up . . . I've had nothing to eat since yesterday morning. . . ."

He spent the whole day hidden in a thicket beyond the flour-mill where he was nearly discovered by a fisherman.

At seven *Joséphine* found him again behind the *Poissonnerie*. He looked so dejected that tears came into her eyes.

"I haven't been able to get much. No chance of slipping my hand into the till. The boss never leaves it. This is all I've got. . . ."

A handful of small change, her tips.

"Then I'd better give myself up."

"Don't."

"Unless you can hide me. . . ."

She gave in. She took him into the yard behind the *Trois Pigeons* which was always cluttered with carts and barrows. At night she fetched him and took him up to her room.

"Nothing else, mind you!"

She gave him some food and a bottle of wine. He slept on the floor.

It was only on the third night. . . . He begged her so pitifully. . . . He kept talking of giving himself up. . . .

He had a birthmark on his left cheek. . . .

Dragging their feet, the men came back from the field on the other side of the road. Passing the kitchen window, Etienne looked in. It was a suspicious look, full of unspoken thoughts.

"Supposing you've put me in a family way. . . ."

Yes, she had said that, dreamily, gazing at the ceiling as she lay naked on the narrow bed. And she could remember the boy's laugh and the hopeful way in which he'd said:

"Really? Do you think I might have?"

Why should she have felt almost sure of it?

"To-morrow I'll see if I can hook you a hundred francs out of the till. It's market day."

She did better than that. A farmer came in and hung his coat up. She saw a bit of his wallet sticking out of a pocket. She took it and opened it in the yard.

"Here! Take these, and get out of the place as quick as you can. It won't be long before the chap makes a shindy and the whole place'll be searched."

They didn't even kiss goodbye.

"Thanks. You're a brick," was all he said.

He went off lightheartedly. She stayed behind troubled. She couldn't get rid of the idea that. . . .

The funny thing was that the farmer didn't kick up a shindy after all. After leaving the café he'd been to a brothel. It was only later that he discovered his loss and thought he might just as well keep his mouth shut.

There was another man there, a big clumsy fellow, who couldn't take his eyes off the girl, who sat there for hours and who tried to touch her hand each time she served him.

It would be an exaggeration to say that Joséphine had made up

her mind the first day. All the same the idea dawned on her vaguely: "If it comes to *that*. . ."

And a day or two later she was interested enough to ask her employer:

"Who is he?"

"Him? . . . He's Etienne Roy. . . . He'll never have anything to worry about. His father's got the best farm at Saint-Odile. . . ."

Twice the inn-keeper had crept up to the door of her room and knocked discreetly. She had pretended not to hear. She wasn't going to get into a situation of that sort. In any case she wouldn't be staying at the *Trois Pigeons* for long.

She waited anxiously for a certain date. When it came and when a few more days had passed she *knew*. From then on she spent more and more time in Etienne's corner.

It's difficult to be sure of a man. You never really know what's going on in his mind. Particularly with Etienne Roy. He was such an incalculable mixture of simplicity and shrewdness. She had no time to lose. On the other hand it would be fatal to rush things.

She worked it all out and played her cards carefully. Once she asked for a day off and drove past *Gros-Noyer* in the bus. But she took care not to be seen.

It was two days after that that Etienne, with his temples throbbing, had followed her upstairs.

To-day she was the mistress of that warm inviting kitchen. The men had all trooped in. The two Chaillous stood there a bit awkwardly, not knowing quite what to do with themselves. Though they had been there often enough, they were still a bit intimidated by Madame Roy and by the white tablecloth.

"Didn't the postman come," asked Etienne, who had certainly spotted him from the field.

Joséphine fetched his farming magazine from the sewing machine, on which it had been put. She didn't say anything about the postcard. She tried to guess from Etienne's expression whether he had come in and seen it while she was shopping in the village, but it was quite impossible to tell.

As she doled out the mussels, she said in a toneless voice:

"Some people came this morning. From Fumay in the Ardennes. . . . A woman who thought she could recognise her husband."

"They won't be the last!" put in one of the two brothers.

"Why not?"

"Because of those sixty thousand francs. . . . With a reward like that offered, all the women whose husbands have walked out on them will come flocking here."

Joséphine's busy movements had displaced the card, a corner of which, she suddenly realised, was protruding from her dress. She went back to the stove and with her back to the table tucked it away again.

Had her husband seen it? He was sitting at the opposite end of the table, facing her.

For twenty years and more she had been telling herself that everything was all right, that she had nothing to worry about. She had almost succeeded in persuading herself. . . .

When suddenly, like a bolt from the blue, this stranger had come on the scene. . . .

He was nobody she had ever known. Of that she was sure. He certainly wasn't Le Frisé. Nor was he one of her brothers. Nevertheless the address which he had in his pocket was written in a hand that seemed to her vaguely familiar.

She had got that impression at the very first glance. That's why she had tried to hide it.

To be thrown back on to the road. . . . She had done everything in her power to avoid that fate. . . . And it wouldn't be her fate alone. Lucile's too. . . . For if Etienne ever knew . . .

She had prayed and fasted, prayed that she might have other children, Etienne's children. If only that could happen, she had been convinced everything would come all right.

Was it her fault that she hadn't? It was hardly likely. It must be his, yet she couldn't possibly tell him so. Suppose he went to see a doctor, the latter might tell him that . . .

She was the dignified Mme Roy, mistress of the house, mistress

of everything that is, except Lucile. She never had been able to do anything with her daughter. Not that the latter was rebellious. She was quiet enough. But she seemed to proclaim in every act and attitude that she didn't really belong there, that she was of another race.

Her mother had always been patient and understanding with her. She had good reason to be!

One by one, the empty mussel shells were thrown on to a big plate in the middle of the table. With a large shell the men scooped up the liquor from their plates and sucked it up noisily.

What was brewing behind Etienne's low forehead?

The old man was less dangerous. Perhaps he was more intelligent. Right from the start, Joséphine had had the impression that he knew more than he pretended. He had never said anything, however. He never would. For one thing, he wouldn't have done himself any good. She had always been kind to him. Much kinder than his own wife, who, in the end hadn't left him a sou.

For the farm had always been hers, and on her death she had left everything to Etienne.

For that matter, Evariste might have finished up on the road himself.

Perhaps that was why they had always been considerate to each other. It was as though there was some secret bond between them.

Joséphine took the lid off the saucepan, then poured the steaming stew into a big earthenware dish, while Lucile removed the mussel shells and changed the plates.

VII

On the surface nothing was changed. Everything was in its proper place, everything that was done was done exactly as it always had been. The inhabitants of the farm, human and animal alike, came

and went, ate and drank, slept and woke up, following the day's immutable routine.

The place was spick and span. Joséphine had noticed the envious glance of the old woman, Mme Boumal's mother, as she stumped angrily across the kitchen which she would so dearly have loved to possess herself.

Nevertheless, in the sort of puppet-show that was daily and so competently enacted at *Gros-Noyer*, something had gone wrong, and sometimes as the puppets approached each other they seemed to be seized by an inward panic and be making a great effort to stand firm.

As for the meeting on Friday, it was almost entirely accidental. There, too, something had gone wrong with the show.

Etienne Roy would never believe it. All his life he would remain convinced that Joséphine had deliberately followed him.

If she had ever wanted to, it certainly wasn't that day.

It was the third time in the course of a week that he had been to Fontenay. Admittedly it had never stopped raining and the work on the farm had been reduced almost to a standstill. But that was hardly an adequate excuse. On the Monday he had looked for a better one. Awkwardly, like a lying child, he had said in a whining voice during the midday meal:

"I think I'd better go to the dentist."

It was true he had been complaining of a tooth for the last week. It was obviously a trumped-up pretext, however, since he had never been to a dentist in his life.

Joséphine ought no doubt to have left it at that. Rather tactlessly she answered:

"He won't be there to-day. He works in Damvix on Mondays. . . ."

So much for that! Etienne couldn't go to the dentist. By three o'clock, however, he'd found another reason. She saw him in his mackintosh taking his bicycle out of the shed.

"I'm going to order some nitrates," he muttered.

It was after six when he got back. On the Wednesday he had

harnessed La Grise and gone once again, this time for four sacks of superphosphate. The following day he had wandered about restlessly without quite daring to go.

Now it was Friday. In spite of the next day being market day, he harnessed La Grise once again. Giving up the attempt to find an excuse, he simply drove off without a word, taking care not to look into the kitchen as he passed.

An hour elapsed. Joséphine potted about, then thought she'd scour her copper saucepans. She had no sooner put them on the table, however, when the patient upstairs had one of his attacks. He still had them from time to time, and by this time they had got used to them. They always took the same form. He was gripped by a sudden terror. Trembling from head to foot, he would make a dash for the door or the window. Once he had even wanted to escape up the chimney. At such moments he hardly seemed to know his nurse.

"Mother!"

It was only a short attack. By the time Joséphine got upstairs, it was all over. The stranger had calmed down, though he was still out of breath. He looked penitently at the two women, as though conscious of being a nuisance.

"There's none left," said Lucile, holding up a medicine bottle.

The doctor had prescribed some drops to be given him after each attack. Lucile looked out of the window at the wet landscape.

"If only I'd known Father was going to Fontenay again. . . ."

"Here! Give it to me. . . ."

"You're going?"

That was how it happened. On the spur of the moment. Though it may be that Joséphine had had enough of ruminating in her kitchen and was quite ready to jump at a pretext for getting a breath of fresh air.

She put on her coat and hat and took her bicycle from the shed. Slowly she pedalled along the glistening road, which looked almost more like a canal. It was dark when she reached Fontenay. She

went down the *Rue de la République* and stopped at the *Pharmacie du Pont-Nœuf*.

"If you've any other errands to do, it'll be ready in about a quarter of an hour. . . ."

She hadn't anything else to do, and if it hadn't been that they were both occupied, she would have sat down on one of the chairs by the stove in the chemist's shop.

Outside, the scene looked rather like a back-cloth in a theatre. From the station the *Rue de la République* swept downwards, flanked by two festoons of street lamps. At the bottom, it formed a sort of basin, before sweeping up again, this time more steeply, towards the *Place Viète*. The few people that were about hurried along, hugging the walls.

Joséphine crossed the *Pont-Nœuf*. Twenty yards ahead of her, right at the bottom of the basin were some irregular walls and gabled roofs jutting out at all angles—the *auberge* where she had once been a servant, the *Trois Pigeons*.

A horse harnessed to a *carriole* was pawing the ground. Joséphine at once recognised La Grise.

It was years and years since Etienne had been to the *Trois Pigeons*. Nowadays he went to the *Colonnes*. Whenever on market day she was to meet him after her shopping it always went without saying that it was to be at the *Colonnes*.

She hesitated. Fine cold drops of rain fell on her face and were sprinkled on her hair.

She went in. The place was still and silent except for one man who had too much to drink and was talking at the top of his voice. There were three other men with him at the table in the middle of the room. At another table an old man dozed. The waitress stood at the bar, a black and white cat sprawled on a chair, and there in the darkest corner, all alone, was Etienne Roy staring at the glass in front of him.

As he raised his head, a look of alarm came into his eyes. His first impulse was to jump to his feet, but on second thoughts he remained seated, merely saying:

"What's the matter?"

His voice sounded far away, as though he had been wrenched out of a dream. She sat down beside him and put her bag on the table.

"Nothing. . . . We ran out of medicine. . . . You'd already gone. . . ."

She had noticed his glass of spirits. Two saucers beside it showed it to be his third.

"A glass of lemonade," she said to the waitress, who was standing patiently by their table.

That was all. Nothing happened. Yet this was none the less the most harrowing, the most suffocating moment they had either of them ever lived through.

Till then each had had his own thoughts, their common ground being merely the hundred and one little details of practical life.

Suddenly by accident—for it was far more by accident than intent that Joséphine was there—suddenly they found themselves sitting together in a place they hadn't been to for twenty-three years, yet which was exactly the same. They had no reason to be there and nothing to say to each other.

What were they to do? Get up and go?

They stared in front of them, vaguely conscious of the drunkard who was holding forth at the other table.

". . . Wait till you hear what I said to him. . . . You'll see whether I piped down or no. . . . I said to him: 'Eugène you're an even bigger fool than you look, and that's saying a good deal!'"

Joséphine wiped her eyes. Not that she was crying. It was only with raindrops that her face was wet.

So it was to come to the *Trois Pigeons* that Etienne had day after day trumped up a pretext for driving in to Fontenay! He had tucked himself away in the same corner he had occupied of old. On those days too, there had always been a cat on one of the chairs. What colour had that one been? Perhaps they both belonged to the same family. A dynasty, in fact, like the mares at *Gros-Noyer*.

They had nothing to say to each other. Yet she would have liked . . .

To do what? To say what? To touch his hand perhaps and say gently:

"My poor Etienne!"

It was probably the first time she had pitied him. But what could she do for him? Nothing. Absolutely nothing. She certainly couldn't tell him the truth. And they had reached the point at which whatever she said or did could only strengthen his suspicions.

She knew it. The thing had got hold of him all day long. In the morning, when he woke up, it was still there, preying on his mind.

"Let's go," she murmured.

He looked heavily at her, emptied his glass and fumbled in his pocket for some money.

"We must stop at the chemist's."

He helped her to hoist her bicycle on to the back of the *carriole*. It was still raining, but not enough for them to put up the hood. They crossed the river. At the chemist's, she had to wait a minute or two. The shop was brilliantly lit up. Looking out, she could see La Grise in the glare from the window, and Etienne half lit up, half in shadow, seemed so enormous that she shuddered.

She was afraid, really afraid. Not of anything in particular. Of everything. Of him, of the future, of fate.

"Eight francs fifty, Madame Roy."

She paid, hardly knowing what she was doing. A moment later, she was perched up beside Etienne, looking down on the horse's croup. They climbed the hill at a walking pace.

It was quite a long time since they had driven together. Sometimes they bumped each other with the jolting of the *carriole*. Once past the station, the darkness was complete except for their own lamp.

She felt like calling out to him:

"Stop!"

Never had her nerves been so jangled. No doubt from thinking too much. Of course Liberge had a lot to do with it. It was as though the gendarme knew what he was doing and was doing it on purpose. He was always hanging about, either in the village or

at the farm. He practically never came in—just loafed about outside, knowing very well he was being watched from within.

Undoubtedly he wanted her to see him. Sometimes he stayed till she came to the window. Then he would raise his hand to his *képi* and get back on to his bicycle, apparently satisfied with his day's work.

Was there really nothing she could do? She was tempted to go to Paris to see her mother. For a whole week she had been toying with the idea. But what pretext could she find for doing so? A journey to Paris was not an everyday matter! In fact they had been there only once, she and Etienne, to see the *Exposition Coloniale*.

He said nothing. Neither did she. Nor did they see the expression in each other's faces. All they could see, out of the corners of their eyes, was a vague pale splotch against the darkness beyond.

She tried to reassure herself. *Nothing could be proved*. And so long as it was only conjecture . . .

Or was there perhaps a proof after all? If not, what was the meaning of the danger signal on her mother's card? Had the old woman recognised the stranger from his photographs in the papers? Who could he be? What was he doing at *Gros-Noyer*?

Dr. Naulet and the surgeon had been again the day before. They had discussed the case in front of Joséphine and Lucile, but though the latter had listened with all their ears they hadn't been able to understand a thing on account of all the medical terms used.

"We'll come again next week," Dr. Naulet had said as they left.

"Do you think he'll get his memory back?"

"Possibly . . . Probably . . . But as for when it'll be . . ."

When they reached the level crossing, they found the gates shut. The train was already within earshot. In a moment or two a red cloud came into sight, then the long line of lighted windows streaked by, behind each window a motionless head.

The gates were opened, and the gatekeeper in his sabots slouched back into his cottage as La Grise once more broke into a trot.

"Six o'clock," said Joséphine, knowing which train it was.

No answer. They were now within sight of the farm which crouched beneath some tall trees, black against the less black sky.

Old Evariste must have already started milking. He knew! Not exactly, of course. He couldn't. But Joséphine was sure he had guessed. Right from the start. And by the way he looked at her he seemed to be saying:

"I won't tell . . . I promise. . . ."

Why? . . . Out of affection for her? . . . Hardly. In his heart of hearts he may even have despised her. Perhaps he simply didn't care. Considering Etienne wasn't his son. . . .

And Lucile? Since the stranger had come into the house, she had behaved as though she was jealous of her mother. What did she think? Did she guess? If she guessed, she almost certainly guessed wrong.

As for Etienne . . .

Again she was tempted to touch his hand. It wasn't affection, for she didn't love him. She never had. For that matter, it was doubtful if she'd ever been in love with anybody. But he was her man. They lived together and worked together. She knew all his little weaknesses and as a rule could guess what he was thinking.

Her feeling for him was more like the indulgence of an elder. He knew it. He had always been a little bit afraid of her, of that shrewd look of hers which showed she had seen through a lie, of her tactful way of ignoring certain faults and little cowardices.

Now, however, there was something new, something which had only come into existence during the drive, as they sat shoulder to shoulder in the darkness. Joséphine was conscious of it though she couldn't define it. For twenty years and more they had lived together, slept together, worked together and worried over the same troubles. . . . What she had discovered now was different. It was something much stronger, and that hand that she held back but which she would have liked to stretch out towards him. . . .

Yes. That was it! It was an instinctive desire to cling to him, to cling to her man. They were a couple and they must hold to each other. Otherwise . . .

She was afraid, afraid of everything, above all afraid of this man beside her, the very man who should protect her.

They had never spoken much. Nowadays they hardly spoke at all. He merely came out with the few words that were strictly necessary then plunged back into his own inner world where no one could follow him.

"Etienne! . . ."

No! It was hopeless! She had nothing to say to him. Nothing except perhaps to swear to him that Lucile was his daughter. And he wouldn't believe it!

Perhaps when they got home they'd find the stranger had come to himself. What would he say when that happened? Would he tell them why he had come?

A whole minute had elapsed since she'd said "Etienne!" and they were quite close to the house.

"Well?"

"Nothing . . . I don't know what I wanted to say."

A light was burning upstairs, another in the cowshed. The grey mare turned into the yard and stopped outside the kitchen door.

Joséphine hurried indoors as though she was escaping from some danger. Instantly she set to work, making up the fire, before she even took her hat off.

Everything was just as she'd left it, the copper saucepans on the table with the bottle of metal polish.

She felt washed out. Even her legs felt weak, as though she'd been for a long walk, as though she'd returned from far far away. Yet nothing had happened, nothing at all. She had been to Fontenay for the medicine and been driven back by Etienne.

That didn't alter the fact that she knew she had wandered into regions hitherto unknown. She had had a whiff of a world that was quite different from the everyday one. It had scared her.

She went upstairs, holding her skirt, and opened the door of the sick-room. The man was asleep. Lucile, reading at his bedside, looked up.

"What on earth's the matter with you?"

"With me? . . . Nothing. . . . What makes you think there is?"

"I don't know, but . . ."

So it was noticeable!

"I must go to Paris," thought Joséphine. "I'll find some reason or other. Or perhaps I'll give no reason at all. Anyhow, I must see my mother. She'll tell me. . . ."

She changed her things and came downstairs. Then slipping on her sabots she crossed the yard and joined the two men who were already milking.

"By the way," said the old man from the other side of a cow. She waited.

"The sergeant came again. . . ."

Evariste spat and left it at that.

VIII

She made two mistakes in the space of a few minutes. Each time, though she realised what she had done, she made no attempt to undo it. Perhaps, in a confused way, she felt that her fate lay before her and that all she could do was to go forward to meet it.

The first mistake was to return to her place in the field. The second was to change her mind and come back into the house.

She offered no explanations. At *Gros-Noyer* they had got into the habit of living as though the air had been turned into some hard and transparent matter which isolated each human being from all around him.

The weather had cleared up, and they were taking advantage of it to pull up some salsify. There were long rows of it running down the side of the high field, the one opposite the house, on the other side of the road. There were three of them on the job, each to his own row, Etienne on one side, old Evariste on the other, and Joséphine as though under guard between them.

A car drove up. Nothing unusual in that! Joséphine straightened her back, wiped her hands on her apron and went over to the house. Liberge was the first to get out of the car. She didn't like that. With him was a rotund and very polite little man she hadn't seen before. He took off his hat and apologised for his intrusion.

"Is Mademoiselle Lucile upstairs?" asked the sergeant, like one who was already familiar with the house and its occupants. "If she is, we don't need to bother you, Madame Roy. . . ."

"Lucile!" she called up the stairs.

"Yes," came the answer promptly, for Lucile was already on the landing listening.

The two men went up, leaving Joséphine alone in the kitchen. Nothing had been said which could enable her to guess whether the man in civilian clothes was a doctor or a policeman.

There was something a little lurid in the light that morning, such as may sometimes be seen before a thunder storm, though it wasn't the season for storms. The sun was an insipid yellow. Some clouds were too white, others like dirty cotton-wool. Joséphine stared out of the window, ill at ease.

It was foolish, of course, but she had the feeling that, in going back to her work as though nothing was the matter, she would somehow be hitting back at Liberge.

Her husband asked no questions. Indeed he behaved as though he had noticed neither her departure nor her return.

Then she made her second mistake. She had pulled up barely a dozen salsifies when she suddenly walked off again.

Never mind! She just couldn't help it. Intentionally or not, the sergeant had scared her. This time Etienne looked up from his work and watched her cross the road to the house. So did Evariste. It was perhaps the first time they had ever seen her show such indecision.

As she went through the kitchen, she took off her apron. Going up, she opened the bedroom door and went in. She offered no explanation, merely standing there as though it was her proper place.

The little fat man, who had taken off his overcoat and lit a pipe

was sitting in front of the invalid. Liberge was leaning with his elbows on the window-sill. Lucile stood back, watching.

"You were on a big ship," said the fat man in a paternal tone. "At first it was very hot. . . . Very hot. . . ."

With the patience of a schoolmaster, he wiped his forehead to explain what very hot meant, and he kept repeating:

"Ship . . . Big ship . . . Very hot. . . ."

The stranger gazed back at him calmly. He was interested, much as a little child is interested in the activities of an ant or the struggles of a beetle that has fallen on its back.

The newcomer had turned towards the door when Joséphine entered. He hadn't objected to her presence. As for Liberge, he went on looking out of the window, pretending not to notice her, but a little smile of satisfaction flitted across his face.

"Hand me the photos, Liberge . . . In my brief-case . . . On the left. . . ."

The fat man listened for a moment for a sound from outside.

"I wonder where Mercier's got to. He ought to be here by now."

He looked at his watch and sat down again, apparently reassured. He was an inspector of the *Sûreté Nationale*. With the photographs in his hand, he settled down to work in earnest, showing them one by one to the stranger, commenting on each in turn, generally with a single word.

"Ship . . . cabin . . . engine . . . the sea . . ."

He was patient, starting all over again half a dozen times. The stranger seemed quite to enjoy the performance. He looked at the photographs as though at a picture-book. Never once, as he studied the snapshots taken on board the *Wisconsin* or the *Asie*, did he betray the faintest sign of recognition.

Another packet of photos, this time of colonial scenes—quays, streets, native huts.

It was Lucile, not her mother, who first showed signs of strain. She stood there, paler than usual, breathing deeply, her muscles taut, her eyes staring.

Could it really be that from one moment to the next her patient

might suddenly become an ordinary person, talking like anyone else and telling them all about himself?

Joséphine couldn't help being conscious of the mounting tension in her daughter, and fear gripped her too. She took a couple of steps forward, moving rather like a sleep-walker.

"Perhaps you can help us, Mademoiselle. . . . No doubt you have an album of family photographs in the house. . . . Would you mind fetching it?"

At the same moment a broader smile spread over the gendarme's face. Lucile went downstairs to the sitting-room, returning with a heavy album with brass fittings.

"I'd like you to tell me the names one by one, as I show them to him."

They were mostly of members of the Cailleteau family. The first one was of a very old woman dressed in the style of the Second Empire."

"Who is it?"

Lucile glanced at her mother, and it was the latter who answered: "Elizabeth Caillteau."

The stranger stroked it with his fingers, probably because it was so smooth and shiny. That was all. It was the same with the succeeding photographs of boys and girls dressed for their first communion, of newly married couples, and wedding groups. Whenever Lucile didn't know a name, her mother gave it, speaking in a toneless voice.

Another car drew up outside. Liberge turned to the inspector, who merely said:

"Tell him to fetch them. . . ."

Liberge opened the window and called out to Mercier—a plain-clothes man from Fontenay—as he was getting out of the car:

"You're to go and fetch them."

No names were mentioned, so it had obviously been all arranged beforehand.

Etienne went on bending over his salsify without betraying a sign of interest. Joséphine could see him and, to her, his feigned

indifference seemed menacing. Not only did he avoid looking at the house, he hadn't even glanced at the road to see who had just arrived.

In the bedroom, the inspector puffed away placidly at his pipe.

"Let's have your photos now, Sergeant," said the inspector as they came to the end of the album.

Liberge took out his notebook and removed the elastic band. He shot a keen glance at Joséphine as he handed some half-dozen photographs to his superior.

The first was of her mother, but Joséphine hardly recognised her, as it was a recent one, taken no doubt in her suburb of Paris. Someone must have been sent there for that express purpose, and he hadn't even given her time to tidy herself up a bit. She was fat and ill-kempt, wisps of white hair straggling over a bloated face.

Lucile looked at it too. She had no idea who it was.

"Do you know her?" asked the inspector patiently. "Look at it carefully."

Another photograph of her mother, this time as Joséphine had known her. It was a police photograph, taken no doubt at the time of the trouble at La Roche-sur-Yon, when the whole band had been vetted by the Nantes police.

Joséphine stood there like a statue. There were more photos to come. What would they show? So far Lucile had looked at them uncomprehendedly, but surely she was bound to guess before long.

"Now take your time . . . Look at this one . . . Do you know these people? . . ."

This time the whole band were there. They suddenly came to life, as it were, bursting in upon the quiet atmosphere of *Gros-Noyer*, after fading away for more than twenty years. Joséphine remembered the day it was taken, even the exact time. It was at a fair, at Angers, where they had been, not to sell their wares, but to replenish their stocks. They had all gone, making a day's holiday of it.

The photograph, which was as grubby as the postcard that had come to the farm, showed a group of at least twenty people, men, women, and children.

Justin was seventeen. At his side, with one hand on his shoulder was Le Frisé, a couple of years younger, a boy with a pointed nose, who stared rather arrogantly at the camera.

Joséphine was in the front row sitting on the ground. They were taken in a tent, and there were so many of them that the ones behind were right up against the back-cloth making it bulge queerly.

Joséphine held her breath. She saw that Lucile's knuckles were white with the effort to hold tight. If they looked through a magnifying glass, wouldn't they be able to see the birthmark on Le Frisé's cheek?

Liberge no longer made a pretence of looking out of the window. He stood with his back to it, and his eyes were riveted, not on the stranger, but on Madame Roy. The two men in the field opposite went on with their work. The plain-clothes man from Fontenay came back from the village, followed by Ligier's van, in which were Ligier and his father.

"You're sure you don't know any of them? . . . Look carefully. The young fellow on the left for instance?"

That was Justin.

The stranger shook his head, and Joséphine took a deep breath. The next moment she found herself looking at her daughter in a way she had never done before. She looked at Lucile as though she too belonged to that group in the photograph, as though she was, so to speak, its incarnation.

She was no longer merely her daughter. She was the child of . . . It was strange to see her older than her father was in the photo, older than Joséphine could ever picture Le Frisé, whom she had only known as a highly strung boy who had pleaded so pathetically when she had refused him what he wanted.

Lucile . . . The others, all of them, were enemies. The thing was to save Lucile. She must do that at all costs. She must stick at nothing.

Her nervousness had left her suddenly. She was calm now, tragically calm.

Yes, Lucile must be saved.

Joséphine stared hard at the sergeant. If they were all enemies, he was the arch-enemy. For weeks he had been stalking about, spinning his web of enmity round the house.

That photo, the last one, had certainly been stolen from her mother. Was it because the latter had noticed its loss that she had posted her warning to Joséphine?

"No good . . ." sighed the inspector, handing the photographs back to the gendarme. "We'll have to try again another time. . . . Meanwhile . . . Since you're his nurse, Mademoiselle, would you be so kind as to take him downstairs. Perhaps you'd better wrap him up a bit, as we want him to come out on to the road with us. . . ."

And as Lucile hesitated, he added:

"It's all right. We have the doctor's permission. . . . So long as the weather's fine. . . ."

Lucile looked round her for something warm to put on the man. He hadn't had an overcoat. It was Joséphine who finally went into the next room and fetched her husband's.

She must save Lucile. The girl could do nothing to save herself, for she was quite unaware of the danger which threatened her. How could she imagine for a moment that to-morrow or the next day she might be thrown out neck and crop without a sou in her pocket, obliged to earn her living as best she could, by serving in a café perhaps, or even something worse.

Admittedly she sensed the mystery around her, but she hadn't the faintest idea what it was all about, and the one thing that really frightened her was that someone would come along and rob her of her invalid.

It was up to her mother to save her!

"Aren't you coming down, Madame?"

"Not just yet. . . ."

She wanted to be alone, to be able to think. A minute or two later she saw them all out on the road. The two Ligiers looked worried too. As for Etienne Roy, he still pretended not to notice that anything unusual was going on.

Since it was he who had undertaken the preliminary enquiry, it

was left to Liberge to direct operations. The invalid, out for the first time, looked round with interest. Once or twice he frowned.

Was his memory coming back to him?

But Joséphine was only half interested in the performance. It was the sergeant himself who was the focal point of her thoughts, and more than once she muttered:

"Liberge! . . ."

Ought she to kill him? . . . She turned it over in her mind, coldly weighing up the pros and cons.

First of all, how would she go about it? She would have to ambush him somewhere on the road. There wasn't a revolver in the house. There was Etienne's sporting rifle, but if it came to that it was very doubtful whether she'd know how to use it. . . .

All the same, he ought to be dead. There was no doubt about that. Looking down from the window, she studied him from head to foot without a tinge of pity. For his part, he knew she was looking at him and, busy as he was, he kept her in view out of the corner of his eye.

They were reconstructing the scene of the accident, and for the sake of realism they had brought over the same bicycle that the man had hired from the shop in the *Rue de la République*. They got the stranger to hold it but no sooner had the engine in Ligier's van been started than he dropped it and leapt to the side of the road, where he stood bewildered, looking anxiously for Lucile.

It wasn't very much perhaps, but it was something. The man had been frightened by the sound of the engine. Perhaps one memory would lead to another and then—who could tell—perhaps everything would come back to him in a rush.

It was then that Lucile looked up with a beseeching look in her eyes. She knew nothing as yet, but she was frightened, and it was to her mother that she turned instinctively. And Joséphine smiled back at her. A smile that was like a promise.

Yes, she would save her. She would do whatever was necessary. Only she needed a little time to think it out and make her plans. •You can't kill a man without a certain amount of preparation.

"Now drive past exactly as you did then. . . ."

Ligier was in a cold sweat. If he wasn't very careful all his denials would fall to the ground—and by his own act. He hesitated, gesticulated, raised one objection after another. The walnut tree, for instance, was no longer lying by the side of the road, which made it difficult for him to remember the exact place.

From where she was standing, Joséphine could see their lips moving, but all she could hear was the noise of the engine.

"Come on! Get going. . . ."

Was it a flop? . . . No. . . . Though at first they couldn't understand. The man, who had been left standing on the road didn't wait for the van to drive past, but calmly wandered off on his own.

"Let him go," yelled the inspector.

He didn't go far. As he got near the ditch, he proceeded hesitantly, apparently looking for something.

The suitcase, of course! Did he know himself what he was looking for? Or was it merely a sort of reflex?

Ligier had stopped and was watching the man anxiously. A wisp of smoke rose from the inspector's pipe.

After looking round, the man went a bit further, then retraced his steps.

"Excuse me, Mademoiselle, but do you think you could find us a suitcase? A small one. . . . I'd be much obliged if you could. . . ."

She went off to do his bidding. Joséphine heard her steps on the stairs, then the door opened behind her.

"What is it?"

"They want a suitcase."

There was one on the top of the wardrobe. It was full of old clothes, as it was practically never used. They emptied it on to the floor.

The inspector sneaked up behind the man and dropped it on the edge of the ditch. Then he coughed to draw attention to it. The man approached, bent over it, shook his head.

"It's not that one?"

"No."

"It was about here that you dropped your suitcase, was it?"

No good. It was all over. The invalid looked at him, uncomprehendedly. He wanted to get away. If they'd let him, he'd have walked off along the road, anywhere, just where his feet led him.

"You'd better get him indoors again, Mademoiselle. . . ."

Lucile took his arm and spoke to him. He seemed surprised at finding her again. Had his room upstairs already been effaced from his mind? For a moment it looked like it. Then he smiled and allowed her to lead him in.

"What do I do now?" asked Ligier, who was beginning to regain his self-confidence? "You saw, didn't you? . . . If it had been me . . ."

"All right. You can go home. . . ."

Joséphine was already in the kitchen when they re-entered the house. Liberge couldn't make her out. Why was she staring at him like that? Almost as though she didn't recognise him. . . .

Was he the one that had to be killed? And was he the only one?

"I'm very sorry, Madame, to have put you to all this trouble," said the inspector. "You've been so kind in looking after this man, and as for your daughter . . ."

What was he getting at? Was he planning to take the stranger away?

"I really don't know whether we ought to trade on your kindness any longer. . . ."

He had something at the back of his mind, Joséphine was sure. He was trying to sound her. Liberge had put him up to it. Together they had prepared a trap.

"There'll be other people coming along to see if they can recognise him, and I can well understand what a nuisance they'll be. There's that Madame Boumal, for instance. She's no intention of giving in and has put her case in the hands of her lawyer."

What was she to say to them? If the stranger went, the danger would remain and she wouldn't be at hand to deal with it.

• "It's no trouble, I assure you."

The inspector glanced at Liberge who suppressed a smile. Wasn't it turning out exactly as he had predicted?

"With all the work there is here . . . When a house is kept like this. . . ."

"My daughter has plenty of time on her hands. . . ."

Lucile had taken the man back to his room.

"This morning's experiments haven't taken us very far. But I've had cases like this before and I know how patient one has to be. I haven't given up hope. On the contrary. Twice I thought he was on the verge of something. . . . Anyhow we know one thing: he certainly still had his suitcase with him when he reached the farm. . . . He remembered having lost something, something precious."

"Yes, Inspector . . ."

She was now completely mistress of herself and she didn't forget to fetch the little decanter of cognac and the liqueur glasses.

"You'll have something before you go, won't you?"

"Thank you, Madame Roy. . . . And if you wouldn't mind . . . We've left my assistant from Fontenay outside. . . ."

"By all means. . . ."

"Call him in, Sergeant. . . ."

Joséphine went to fetch another glass from the cupboard in the parlour. Through the window she could still see Etienne's back as he bent obstinately over his work.

When she returned to the kitchen, the three men were talking in an undertone, but she pretended not to notice. The inspector was an observant man. Obviously he was taking in everything.

"This is a very good cognac. Is it your own produce?"

"Yes, Inspector. It's nearly fifteen years old."

She looked almost tenderly at the little decanter which evoked memories of all the state occasions at *Gros-Noyer*, the callers on New Year's Day, Lucile's first communion, the funeral of old Mme Roy.

No. She wasn't going to let them throw her out with nothing but the clothes she stood up in! Nor Lucile either!

"Here's a health to our stranger, and let's hope he soon recovers his memory. . . ."

What was Etienne thinking about all this time, as he pulled up the salsify, one bundle to every yard. They'd have to be washed that evening, all ready for them to be taken next morning to Laubreton's at Fontenay.

He must be thinking something. Otherwise why should he so obviously refuse to look round? . . . He would be chewing the cud of his suspicions, turning them over and over in his mind. . . . There was something terribly threatening in that bent back.

"There's just one thing I'd like to ask you, Monsieur."

A glance at Liberge. He was quite capable of studying that photograph with a magnifying glass and noticing the birthmark. If he did that . . . No. There was no time to be lost. She must cut the ground from under his feet.

"What is it, Madame?"

"It's about one of the photographs you had just now . . . That group . . . It brought back old memories . . . I didn't know there was one in existence. And if you've no further use for it, I'd like to have it. . . ."

The gendarme's face clouded.

"What do you think, Sergeant? . . . For my part I can't see any objection. I don't think it's any further use to us, and if Madame Roy would like to have it."

Reluctantly Liberge got out his notebook. He took quite a moment to find the photograph, groping in his mind for some excuse for holding on to it. Unable to find one, he finally laid it on the table. Joséphine couldn't restrain herself. She snatched it up rather too quickly and stuffed it into her bodice.

"Thank you," was all she could say.

"And now, if the invalid's not too tired, I'd like to ask him a few more questions. . . . You don't mind, do you? . . . Since I've come all the way from Paris. . . ."

"By all means. . . ."

She didn't go up with them. She didn't want to. She poked up the fire and shifted the saucepans on the top of the stove. Once more she was alone. Her first thought was to burn the photograph,

but she couldn't quite bring herself to do it. She wanted to have another look at it first.

She had never been in love with Le Frisé. Love had nothing to do with it. She had been touched, yes, but only because he had been in such a bad way and had pleaded so piteously. He was going away and she would never see him again. . . . To help him pull himself together . . .

With Etienne it had been rather similar. He too had pleaded. Never had she seen a man look at a woman as he had looked at her day after day from his corner seat in the *Trois Pigeons*. He had reached the point where he was ready to give anything, everything. . . .

And yet when they were together in her room she remained untouched, aloof. What he had to give her was not *that*: it was a house, security, peace. The more feverish he became, the more coldly she looked at him.

She could hear the murmur of a voice upstairs. It was the inspector's voice. He was still plodding on with his attempts to coax the stranger, talking to him in a sort of pidgin French, illustrated by much gesticulation.

A little while ago the performance had impressed her. No longer now. She was more inclined to shrug her shoulders over it. It wasn't the fat polite little man who was dangerous. It was Liberge. The inspector eyed the house with a certain respect, or at all events with a benign curiosity, as a Parisian looking at country life, of which of course he understood nothing and never would.

With Liberge it was quite another story. He came from the Lenglé marshes. He knew how to keep silent, to say just what was necessary, to wait, to size people up, to behave, in other words, exactly like a farmer who's buying a cow.

And so long as he was hovering around, so long would she and her daughter be in peril of being put out onto the streets.

Admittedly the old man hadn't thrown his wife out nor the child that wasn't his. Still, his case was different. The farm hadn't belonged to him.

Of course he might have thrown himself out, but perhaps he couldn't bring himself to leave the place even if his position there was little more than that of a labourer.

That was the sort of thing Liberge could grasp and even guess without being told. Joséphine went on with her cooking, stopping suddenly every now and again as the question once again flashed through her mind:

"How? . . ."

She mustn't be caught. She didn't want to go to prison, having already a pretty shrewd idea what it was like from having spent many a night as a girl, even as a child, on a bench in a police station.

"Violet, Joséphine. . . . Come here. . . . Your papers. . . ."

Never again!

The three men came down from upstairs.

"Nothing doing," said the inspector ruefully. "But that soup of yours smells pretty good, Madame Roy. . . ."

"If you'd like to stay and take pot luck with us . . ."

"I'm afraid they're expecting me back at Fontenay. . . . It only remains for me to thank you for . . ."

Words, and more words. Meanwhile Liberge merely looked at her as much as to say:

"That leaves you and me face to face. . . . We'll see who has the last word!"

Casually he poured himself out another glass of cognac and drained it at a gulp.

"I'll be seeing you again one of these days, Madame Roy."

One of these days, yes! But preferably not before she'd had time to work things out.

Bows, smiles, farewells. The cars drove off. It was twelve o'clock. The angelus rang in Saint-Odile and the two men in the field promptly dropped their tools and walked slowly to the house.

Never again!

Now that she had come to a decision, Joséphine was more mistress of herself than ever. She laid the table. The men washed their hands.

"Lucile! . . . Dinner. . . ."

"Coming . . ."

Knives and forks. A dish passed round. Etienne's eyes were slightly bloodshot. He looked at nobody. With his elbows on the table, he ate nosily like a badly brought up child.

The old man seemed completely indifferent, yet Joséphine was more convinced than ever that he guessed everything and sat back calmly to watch the drama as a spectator.

Did it matter to him? Did anything matter to him except this house which he had entered as a hired man and which had become, if not exactly a home, at any rate the nearest approach to one he could expect.

The nearest approach. It was Etienne who had inherited the farm. There wasn't even a place for the old man in the family grave. Admittedly it wasn't much, but for what it was worth he was going to hold on to it whatever happened. Nobody had a right to turn him out. Legally he was Etienne's father.

With his pocket-knife he cut large pieces off his hunk of bread and stuffed them into his mouth, chewing them slowly.

Etienne wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. Under pressure from Joséphine, the men had acquired the habit of washing their hands before meals, but to get them to use napkins was another matter.

She looked at her husband astonished by his look of strength. His shiny skin seemed to be bursting with an over-rich, over-vital flesh. It was slightly indecent.

She had never seen him lose his temper. Groping in her memory, she could only think of the incident of the mangy cat he had killed with a stick, but even then, ugly as it was, he had appeared to do it almost with indifference, and he had calmly carried the thing across the yard and thrown it on to the dungheap.

Her thoughts hovered between him and Liberge. The gendarme was the more subtle. He was often sneering, and when he was, his lips would curl up slightly, revealing his pointed teeth.

What was she doing? She had hardly realised it herself. Sitting there eating her dinner, she was comparing them, asking herself: "

"Which of them is the most dangerous?"

For years Etienne Roy had done his best to smother his suspicions. At all events he had kept them to himself. He had tried to be happy in so far as anyone can hope to be happy in this life. He had been docile, perhaps too docile, and she had no doubt taken advantage of it. She had always kept a critical eye on him indoors, as she wanted the house. . . .

Yes, that was the whole point—the house! It wasn't hers, as it had been old Madame Roy's, but it was more than that: it was her! In the old days the Cailleteaus had lived there just like any other family of the Marshlands or the Bôcage country. While with her . . .

"Wash your hands, Etienne. . . . Go and get changed. . . . If you take my advice you'll . . ."

And Etienne had done as he was told. He had always given in. Joséphine had been sure of herself, sure that whatever she wanted was the right thing.

And now? . . . He must be weighing it all up, sitting in judgment. Was he waiting for a proof? Perhaps no longer. In that case. . . .

In that case the outcome would be terrible. That fact suddenly stared her in the face. Ten years previously, over by Velluire, in Pré-aux-Corbeaux to be exact, a man called Martin had gone home one evening. He was a quiet man, every bit as quiet as Etienne, even more so. He had been to the local fair and some said he'd been drinking. That was indeed the only thing people could find to say.

He had had supper as usual with the family and the farm hand, but later had refused to go up to bed. Instead, he had written a letter to the *gendarmerie* and walked the best part of a mile to post it.

Back at home, he had taken an axe and killed his wife and the two children and the farm hand. Then he had gone down to the cellar and hanged himself.

It was all in the letter—even that they'd find his body in the cellar—but without so much as a hint as to why he'd done it.

A madman's crime. That's what the newspapers called it. But how

could you expect newspaper men to understand? To the villagers there was nothing mad about it at all. If Martin's wife and the farm hand . . .

Only, right up to the moment it happened, nobody had suspected anything at all. Nor had Martin himself by the look of things. For he had returned from the market with a bundle of young leeks for planting out.

The leeks had never been planted, but at the last minute he had taken care of the animals, casting them loose so that they could find their own way into the field in the morning, in case his letter didn't reach the *gendarmerie* by the first post.

A quiet man! Everybody said so. Gentle as a lamb! Incidentally, he had slightly bulging eyes, like Etienne, and they were apt to be a bit bloodshot on market days.

She looked at Etienne, who was staring at his plate. Perhaps he didn't dare look up. At the same time, in her mind's eye she saw another face, that of the sneering Liberge. . . .

Which of them was the more dangerous?

In the end, it was the gendarme's face that faded out, leaving the field to Etienne Roy who walked blindly forward, an axe in his hand.

So what? Ought she perhaps to . . .

That was too terrible. Joséphine was his wife. Lucile was his daughter, at all events in the eyes of the law and society. But, without Etienne, what could Liberge do to her? She had committed no crime. Only Etienne could throw her out of the house.

The house! It all came back to that—being thrown out of the house, she and Lucile, back on to the road. . . .

"Some more potato?"

The old man held out his plate, then Etienne did the same.

"Not for me," said Lucile. "I'm not hungry to-day. I think I'd better go back upstairs. He seems a bit restless. . . ."

"All right . . . Run along. . . ."

Liberge . . . Etienne . . . Liberge, . . . Etienne . . . Etienne?

They got up from the table. She cleared away, but didn't wash

up. She knew the men were behindhand with the salsify, so she went back to work with them in the field across the road.

IX

It sometimes happen that patients who are told by the doctor that they may live another three or four years, on condition they follow the strictest regimen, experience a sudden relief. The very strictness of the regimen seems to offer them a new life, they surround themselves with pills and potions, and from then on it is the doses that mark the hours of the day.

It was rather like that with Joséphine Roy. The three days that followed the visit of the inspector from Paris were among the most lucid of her life. The moment of panic was past. No longer was she startled if she became aware of someone standing behind her.

Her consciousness was heightened to the point where every day seemed more like a week. For how many hours of their lives are people fully conscious? Particularly in the country where nearly every act is done more or less automatically at the behest of the season or the weather.

Yet for three whole days Joséphine's awareness never lapsed. Not for a single minute. She saw everything, heard everything, and was at the same time acutely conscious of all that she herself was thinking and feeling. And this state of tension never once resolved itself into nervousness. She was quiet, calm, you might almost say at peace.

At what precise moment was the decision taken? At no precise moment, as a matter of fact. It took shape gradually in a succession of stages. First there was the sight of Etienne's back—that threatening back—as from the upstairs windows she watched him working in the field, while the sergeant darted about on the road reconstructing the accident.

During dinner she had weighed the danger, with Etienne in one scalepan, Liberge in the other.

In the afternoon, as she once more bent over a row of salsify, she knew that a decision *had already been taken*. For it now seemed simple, obvious, and inevitable.

Etienne Roy must die. She had accepted what fate had ordained. It seemed so obvious that, when she glanced at her husband, it was almost uncanny to see him still breathing, still moving his limbs, just like anyone else.

She had no pity. She didn't even think of asking herself whether she had any. On the other hand she felt no hatred either.

It was simply a question of facing a situation seriously, of taking responsibility. She had always taken things seriously and by the thoughtful look on her face as she went about her daily tasks, anyone might have thought she was calculating how to balance her weekly budget.

The weather had turned really cold. A low wintry sky drove ceaselessly over the marshes and the stark row of poplars.

The second night, as she lay in bed at Etienne's side, she heard a sound from the direction of the cowshed. She knew at once what it was and got up.

"What's the matter?" asked Etienne sleepily, as she slipped on a dress and looked for her black woollen shawl.

Then he remembered, and got up too. The hands of the alarm clock were at three o'clock. It was freezing hard.

Etienne carried the stable lantern, and the two of them made their way to the cowshed where one of the cows was on the point of calving. It was a long and laborious business. Soon they were joined by the old man, and they all three waited there, grateful for the little warmth which came from the animals.

Her hands tucked away under her shawl, Joséphine took up once more the thread of her thoughts. The ditch at the bottom of the lower field was deep, deep enough for a mare to have been drowned in it. Etienne couldn't swim. The banks were of slippery mud. But how could she lure him there to push him in?

It wouldn't be easy, least of all with so mistrustful a person as Etienne. Besides, if he shouted, he could be heard from the outlying houses of the village. In fact there was one—the woman Sarcau's hovel—from which the place could actually be seen.

Another idea. . . . Suppose she caught him alone in the stable and struck him on the forehead with an iron bar, wouldn't everybody think it was La Grise who had given him a kick?

No. That wouldn't do either. Not because she shirked the idea of striking the blow, but because, once again, it was so difficult to take Etienne unawares. It would have to be one clean blow. No bungling. Otherwise he'd defend himself, and he was far stronger than she was.

At last the calf was born. The three people standing there hadn't exchanged a single word. Etienne was more shut up, more threatening than ever, and she was glad she had taken her decision.

It was on the evening of the second day that she finally settled on the means—poison—and she spent half the night working out the details. That morning she had been to the village to buy some meat. Coming back from the butcher's she had noticed some mushrooms in a meadow. All the family were keen on mushrooms, Etienne greedier than any.

Could it really be said he was greedy? With his elbows on the table he put away vast quantities of food in a way that might make anyone wonder whether he knew what he was eating. When they had mussels, for instance, she always had to allow five pints for him alone, and when he'd finished them he would contemplate with satisfaction the heap of grey-blue shells in front of his plate.

Anyhow, greedy or no, he could be counted on to polish off any plate of mushrooms that was put in front of him. Mushrooms had a strong taste: that was important. Joséphine thought of everything.

So as not to light fires in two rooms, the invalid was nowadays brought down into the kitchen, where he spent hour after hour sitting beside the stove.

"To-morrow morning I'll go mushrooming."

She went, in her sabots, with a large basket on her arm, and a shawl over her head as it rained intermittently.

When she got back at ten o'clock, Lucile helped her to peel them.

"The sergeant looked in," she said.

"What did he want?"

"It seems they're going to arrest Ligier again."

Joséphine smiled faintly, not because the wretched poultry-dealer was going back to the prison, but at the idea that in a short while Liberge would no longer be dangerous.

She had to go into one of the outhouses without being noticed. The men were in the upper field planting Spanish onions. First she went to the cowshed. That couldn't possibly excite anybody's suspicion. From the cowshed she sneaked round to the shed by a back way. She had a little medicine bottle tucked under her shawl. It had formerly contained some drops for earache.

The newspapers had put her up to the necessary precautions. She didn't disturb the dust on the shelf and when she replaced the tin of mole-poison she put it back in exactly the same place. She had a rag in her hand as she held the tin and poured out a little of its contents into the bottle.

Would that be enough? The trouble was that the newspapers never told you what dose was necessary, or if they did it was in technical terms that she couldn't understand.

Would three or four drops do? The stuff had quite a strong smell and if she used too much the mushrooms wouldn't cover it.

If she was nervous now, it was no more than impatience. She was longing for it to be over and done with. A dozen times she looked at the old kitchen clock, and she laid the table a quarter of an hour earlier than usual.

Everything was worked out, even to the extent of letting the fire almost go out and opening the door for a good ten minutes so that it would be cold enough in the room to justify her wearing her shawl.

When people die after eating mushrooms, does anyone ever ask awkward questions? No. If they did it would only be to enquire into the possibility of her having picked some toadstools by mistake. No one would suggest a post-mortem.

To carry it off, Joséphine would pretend to be upset herself. It wouldn't surprise anyone that Etienne should be the only serious victim, as everyone knew he ate twice as much as anyone else.

The problem, of course, was how to put the poison in his mushrooms and no one else's. If Lucile had been away, she might have considered poisoning the old man as well, just to simplify the job. For that matter there was the stranger too, who now had his meals with them. But she didn't even think of him. He didn't count.

As she laid the table, she deliberately broke the dish in which the mushrooms would normally have been served, and she took care to leave the pieces where everybody could see them.

Evariste came in first, followed a little later by Etienne, who had been to have a look at the calf. They washed their hands. As for the injured man, he watched their comings and goings with great interest, as though this was the first glimpse of family life he had ever had.

He sat down beside Lucile who always looked after him at meals.

First came the soup. The mushrooms meanwhile were simmering in a huge frying-pan. When the soup was finished, Joséphine removed the plates, under each of which was a clean one ready for the next course.

She turned first to the old man.

"Hand me your plate . . . I dropped the dish just now and broke it."

She helped him direct from the frying-pan, turning her back on the table.

In a few minutes now it would be all over. She took Etienne's plate and once more turned round towards the stove. Her shawl screened the hand that held the little medicine bottle. Two ladlesful of mushrooms, a few drops of the mole-poison, then more mushrooms on top.

"Now yours, Lucile."

Her heart was hardly beating faster than usual. She pointed to the stranger.

"What about him?"

W.O.W.

S*

There! It was done! She helped herself and sat down in her place. She had told herself she mustn't look up too soon, though she was dying to see what happened.

Suddenly her blood ran cold. Etienne's fork was poised in mid air. Slowly he got up from his chair, maddeningly slowly. She watched him walk over to the door, go out into the yard and spit out what he had in his mouth.

He stood there for a moment with his back to them. Lucile frowned.

"What's the matter with him?" she said.

When she turned round, his face was inscrutable. As he came in, his great bulk seemed to fill up the whole doorway. He looked Joséphine straight in the eye, then with a glance at his plate he said to the old man:

"You'd better not eat them."

Why was his remark addressed to Evariste alone? Because he had understood. There was no possible doubt about it. He knew very well that Joséphine wouldn't poison her daughter.

"Really?"

This time the old man, usually so discerning, had twigged nothing.

"They seem all right to me," he went on. "Who picked them?"

Joséphine just managed to say:

"I did. . . . And I was most careful. . . . Lucile and I peeled them together. . . . If there was a bad one . . ."

Would Etienne give her time to retrieve the situation? With the utmost self-control she avoided showing any haste in her movements, and as she gathered up the plates she took care not to begin with Etienne's.

Why didn't he stop her? He merely stood there looking at her. She expected him to snatch the plate out of her hands and rush with it to the doctor's.

Was he doubtful? Or was it that he was so certain that he wouldn't take the trouble to get confirmation?

A few steps more . . . She reached the dustbin . . . She threw the mushrooms away.

When she returned to the table the old man was helping himself to cheese.

Why didn't Etienne do something, say something? He seemed for a moment to be hesitating, then he once again went over to the door. First he slipped on his sabots, then he went out and strode slowly and heavily across the yard to the stable.

It was only when he realised that Etienne was harnessing the mare that Evariste began to look puzzled. He didn't say anything, but just sat staring out of the window into the yard.

"Where's he going?" asked Lucile.

Couldn't she keep her mouth shut? Couldn't she understand that all was now lost? Joséphine had no hope now. Yet she had to sit there as though nothing had happened, pretending to eat.

Where was he going? Not to the police. If that had been his intention he'd have gone armed with the incriminating evidence. By the time he got back there'd be no trace of it anywhere. She'd see to that.

The old man finished picking his teeth with his pocket knife and got to his feet.

"Come on! . . . You must eat it up . . ." said Lucile to her patient.

The latter was more bewildered than ever. He couldn't understand why everybody had drifted away leaving him at the table alone with Lucile, nor why he'd been given some mushrooms only to see them snatched away.

La Grise passed, dragging the trap. Etienne sat motionless holding the reins in one hand, the whip in the other. The old man seemed in no hurry to leave the kitchen. Joséphine wondered how much longer she could hold herself in.

Finally he went out. No sooner was the door shut behind him than Joséphine cried:

"Lucile!"

"What is it, Mother? . . . What's the matter with you all?"

Her mother was on the point of telling her everything. She was gripped by a terror far more acute than the one that had goaded her on to what she'd done.

For although she had gone calmly about it, it was fear that had prompted her attempt to eliminate Etienne. And now he was alive! Now he knew! Where was he off to behind his trotting mare under the low marshland sky?

"Mother! Tell me . . . What's the matter?"

"Nothing. . . . I don't know. . . ."

What could she tell her? What good would it do? The one thing was to keep calm, but that was impossible. She couldn't keep still. She wanted to fly, to run out of the house carrying Lucile like a baby in her arms, as though to escape from a fire.

"Mother! . . ."

"Don't take any notice. . . ."

She ran upstairs and into her bedroom.

Hadn't they better get away? Both of them. But where should they go? It seemed hopeless. What could they carry with them? Mentally she considered the suitcases in the house as she stood in the middle of the room gloomily contemplating her image in the wardrobe mirror.

She pictured herself with Lucile in a headlong flight along the road.

"Hurry! . . . We're not going fast enough. . . . He may be back at any minute. . . ."

Once more, where should they go? There was about eight hundred francs in the wardrobe. She knew, as it was always she who had charge of any money that was in the house.

They'd have to get to Fontenay. On foot too. And carrying their suitcases. With the risk of running into Etienne on his way back.

At Fontenay they could wait at the station. There was no train till six. How far could they get with eight hundred francs?

And what about Liberge? Mightn't he be lying in ambush somewhere not far from the house?

A light hesitant step. Lucile crept in, looking worried.

"Do tell me. . . . Is there anything wrong?"

Joséphine had just sufficient control of her voice to answer dully:

"It's nothing . . . At least . . ."

It was to save Lucile that she had wanted to . . . Etienne would come back . . . He was certain to . . . Where could they hide?

They might lock themselves in a room and barricade the door with furniture, refusing to open it on any pretext.

If Etienne had gone to Fontenay it was to drink. She was sure of it. She was sure he'd gone to the *Trois Pigeons*, to sit down in the same corner as of old and drink glass after glass of spirits till he could hold no more.

After which he'd stagger back home, his head bursting with evil thoughts.

"Are you ill, Mother? . . . Though you didn't have any mushrooms, did you?"

"Leave me alone. . . ."

Yes, he'd come back. That was all she could think about . . . And when he did . . .

There wasn't even a revolver in the house. If there had been she could have waited for the first threatening gesture, then pulled the trigger. But what was the good of thinking about that? There wasn't one, and she couldn't very well go round the village trying to borrow one.

Lucile was at her wit's end. She had never seen her mother in such a state. She looked ghastly, with drawn features and terror in her eyes. The invalid had been left downstairs. He could be heard moving about. What was he doing?

"Please, Mother . . . Please . . . Look at me . . . Say something . . ."

"Look here, Lucile! . . . I think you'd better . . ."

But where? Where could she send her? . . . Besides, she couldn't let her go alone. It seemed to her that the danger would be still greater.

"Go into the other room. Lock yourself in, and don't open for anyone but me."

"What have you done?"

"Nothing. . . . For the love of God don't ask questions."

If she did, anything might happen. Joséphine was within an ace

of throwing herself on to the floor, writhing, shrieking, and biting the carpet!

"Go on. Go and look after your invalid."

And as Lucile didn't move, she shouted almost angrily:

"Go on, I tell you! . . . Go away! . . . Go away!"

Left alone, she went and leant her forehead against the window-pane. Straight in front of her was the place where the great walnut had fallen. The root was still there, but old Evariste had sawn the stump off level with the ground. On the road a horse and trap were approaching.

"Lucile! . . . What are you wandering about for? . . . Why aren't you in the room?"

"I'm going, Mother . . . I had to fetch him back from the yard. He was going away."

What did it matter if he did? . . . As things were. . . .

The trap passed. It was Bertrand, the blacksmith, on his way back from the town.

Couldn't she call him? Couldn't she ask him to drive them over to Maillezais?

It was too late, he had gone. Evariste Roy had resumed his place in the field, the only living creature in the grey forlorn landscape.

"*Mon Dieu!* . . . *Mon Dieu!* . . . muttered Joséphine.

She couldn't keep still. She went downstairs. She still had enough presence of mind to empty the dustbin on to the rubbish heap and cover the mushrooms with a lot of ashes. Where was the little bottle?

It was still tucked inside her bodice. She broke it, scattered the fragments on to the rubbish heap and dug them in with a fork. No one was watching her.

She went to the gate to see if anyone was about.

"Bonjour, Madame Roy . . ."

She looked ferociously at the sergeant, then suddenly softened.

"Come in, won't you?"

"It's hardly worth while . . . I looked in this morning, but you

were out. . . . I've just come from Fontenay. . . . I met your husband."

"What did he say?"

"Nothing. . . . He was just getting into the town. . . . I don't think he saw me. . . ."

"Do come in for a moment and have something. . . ."

"Well . . . Since I'm here . . ."

She brought out the decanter and a little gold-rimmed glass. On second thoughts she got out another glass for herself. Some brandy would do her good.

"By the way . . . I've found the suitcase at last. . . ."

Three days ago she would have started at the news, but the suitcase interested her no longer. Liberge noticed it. He none the less went on:

"I dare say we're a bit slow, but we always get there in the end, you know. . . . And I said to myself: 'If it wasn't Ligier who took it—and why should Ligier have taken it since he had no reason to think there was anything valuable in it?' . . . The thing is to put yourself in other people's shoes, and I looked at it this way: 'There's a man lying by the side of the road with a suitcase by his side. Who would it be who might take the suitcase without bothering about the injured man? Tramps? Gipsies?' "

He brought out the last word on purpose. Was it to retaliate for Joséphine's apparent indifference?

"Only there were no tramps or gipsies about that day. We checked up on that at once. . . . Who could it be then? Some good-for-nothing, like old Mother Sarcou, for instance? . . . I thought of her. . . ."

Etienne had long since arrived at Fontenay. Was he still sitting in the *Trois Pigeons*? Joséphine kept on looking at the clock.

"Only, she hadn't been round this way either. I checked up on her too. . . . Then what about a schoolboy? They're terrors. Can't keep their hands off anything. Some of them go about pinching things whether they want them or not. Just for the fun of it! . . . What's more a boy slouching along the road doesn't attract anybody's

attention, still less if he goes that way every day. . . . Without letting on what was in my mind I went round asking questions, all sorts of questions. . . . I was beginning to think I was on the wrong track when yesterday the youngest of the Moisset boys said to me:

" 'Jules Suireau's got a seven-bladed knife.'

"So I got hold of Jules Suireau.

" 'Come on, Jules,' I said, 'let's have a look at your seven-bladed knife!'

" 'Who's sneaked?' he asked.

" 'Let me have a look at it.'

" 'I haven't got it any more.'

" 'What have you done with it then?'

" 'Thrown it in the pond.'

"I went through all his pockets then and there on the road, but I didn't find anything. Then I took him home and spun a yarn to his parents while I had a look round. I found it all right. . . .

"It wasn't the sort of knife you could get here. An American make. . . . Would you like to see it?"

He couldn't understand why Joséphine was so little interested. She seemed hardly to be listening. It bothered him. He held out the knife which she merely glanced at out of politeness. She didn't want to offend him, as she didn't want him to go.

" 'Where's the suitcase?' I asked the boy all of a sudden.

" 'What suitcase?'

" 'The one you found this knife in. You picked it up in the road at *Gros-Noyer*. We know all about it.'

"First he lied. Then he began to cry. His father gave him a basting—and then another one as the boy bit his hand—but to cut a long story short he told us in the end and led us to a hollow oak where he'd hidden the thing. Used to sneak off there on the sly to have a look at his haul. . . ."

But what about Etienne? Was he still at Fontenay?

Liberge filled up his glass again, then Joséphine's too. He was surprised to see her gulp the brandy down, she who usually wouldn't touch anything stronger than wine.

"Unfortunately, finding the suitcase hasn't got us anywhere. A few clothes in it and a few nick-nacks from South America or Africa, but not a thing which might give us a clue to his identity."

Joséphine opened her mouth as though to utter a cry. She had heard the trundle of wheels and thought she could recognise La Grise's trot. She wasn't mistaken. The trap turned into the yard. Etienne got down and came and looked through the window into the kitchen, where the light was already switched on, to see who was there. Then he went back and unharnessed the mare, watered her although she was sweating, and led her to the stable.

When he'd finished with her, no doubt he would find something else to do, pottering about until the gendarme had left.

No. From the stable he crossed the yard again and pushed open the kitchen door, saying:

"Salut, brigadier! . . ."

He avoided looking at his wife. He fetched a glass from the cupboard, not a liqueur glass but a large claret glass, and filled it right to the top with brandy, which he drank noisily like a man who is already pretty well primed.

"I was just telling your wife . . ."

And Liberge began his story all over again, though Roy showed no more interest in it than his wife had.

Darkness had fallen. By rights they should all be milking now, but Joséphine dared not venture into the cowshed where Etienne would soon join her.

"Boys, you know, are the biggest liars of all. Grown-ups are bad enough, heaven knows, but boys. . . ."

As he said that Liberge turned towards Joséphine. No doubt his words were full of meaning, but the time was past when insinuations could make any impression on her. They sounded merely silly now. For Etienne knew. He knew everything, and very likely believed a good deal more than that.

He drank. His face was red, his eyes bloodshot, but his thoughts were certainly as black as night.

Like that, he was so terrifying that even the gendarme's presence

seemed to offer little protection. Once again she was seized with panic and, hardly knowing what she was doing, she hurried out of the kitchen and rushed upstairs. She knocked nervously on the door for Lucile to unlock it, but the only response was a calm voice saying:

"Come in. . . ."

Why hadn't Lucile locked herself in as her mother had told her? Joséphine turned the key in the lock and looked round for some furniture that could serve as a barricade.

"Here, Lucile! Help me with this. . . ."

"But, Mother. . . ."

"Quickly. There's no time to be lost. . . ."

What must they be thinking downstairs when they heard a chest of drawers being dragged across the floor?

"Who's in the kitchen?"

"Your father and the sergeant."

"What is it you're afraid of?"

"It's difficult to explain. . . ."

The invalid was watching them with the same mild interest he showed in everything. He was like a great overgrown baby.

"Listen, Lucile . . . I don't know what's going to happen. . . . Probably something awful. . . . Perhaps you ought to know. . . ."

"I know already, Mother."

"What?"

"That he's not my father."

"Who told you?"

"Nobody . . . I've been thinking things over and I . . ."

But Joséphine was listening to the sounds from downstairs. The scrape of chair-legs on the tiles. The door being opened and shut. The sergeant ringing his bicycle bell as he turned into the road, heaven knows why unless it was to conform to some regulation or other. In a couple of minutes he'd be in Saint-Odile. He'd go into the warm parlour of the inn, opposite the forge, and . . .

"Do you think he knows all, Mother?"

She wasn't referring to Liberge but to her father. No sound came

from below now. What was he doing alone in the kitchen? The decanter had been almost full of brandy, having been refilled after the visit of the inspector from Paris. If he drank the lot. . . .

He went out. They could hear his steps as he crossed the yard. Joséphine began to calm down, but a moment later the steps returned, coming from the direction of the tool-shed. He came into the house. He started up the stairs. He went down again, doubtless to have another drink, then started up again.

"Lucile!"

"But, Mother . . ."

"Shut up. . . . You can't understand. . . . You've got to escape. . . . Somehow. . . ."

She didn't know what she was saying. With a haggard face she stared at the chest of drawers in front of the door.

Etienne tried the handle, then he gave the door a kick, then another. After that there was a pause. He was mustering all his strength for another assault. A moment later his shoulder came against the panel of the door with all his weight behind it.

"What's he going to do?"

Panic now got hold of Lucile too. She ran to the window and opened it. She wanted to call for help, but there was no sign of anybody outside, nothing but the black night whose cold damp air blew into the room making them shiver.

Where was old Evariste? If only the gendarme . . .

On the other side of the door, Etienne was growling like a bear. Once more he hurled himself against the door, and this time the panel gave.

They saw him, just for a second, not so much his face as the look in his eyes which were bereft of all humanity.

Perhaps he was afraid the two women might escape through the window. They had thought of that. Unfortunately it was too high, and the ground beneath paved with flagstones.

Again he plunged forward, and again. The chest of drawers fell forward with a crash. The veins on his forehead looked as though they would burst.

"Lucile!"

The uncanny thing, the most uncanny thing of all, was to see the stranger who understood nothing and who never would, get up from his chair and with a childish smile on his face go to meet the mass of fury that advanced into the room.

He was the first to fall, with a little whine absurdly disproportionate to the savage blow that felled him.

The mass of fury advanced further towards the two women huddled by the window. They could hear his breathing, they could feel his hot breath on their faces. . . .

X

At about four o'clock, when the day was already drawing in, old Evariste Roy had felt in his pocket for his tobacco, only to realise that he had none left. Leaving the field through the gate he had sauntered with his leisurely stride towards the village. Rounding the bend in the road he had met another old man, Périneau, who had been a farm labourer as he had been and who had now become the village drunkard.

"Hallo, Evariste. . . . Shall we have one?"

Evariste first bought his tobacco and filled his pipe. Then he and Périneau sat down on a bench in the village inn, the same bench they had sat on as young men, in proof of which were their initials cut into the wood with their knives.

"A *chopine* of wine, Marie."

Evariste had had an affair with her, but that was long ago. Now she seemed to have shrunk away to nothing, except for her fat belly that stuck out in front of her.

"Oh! So it's you again!" she said to Périneau, who may well have had a bit of fun with her too before he took to drink.

The two men were the only customers in the low room.

"Bring us another, Marie," called out Périneau presently, interrupting a diatribe against politics and politicians.

Evariste smoked, and as usual had little to say. The gendarme arrived, leant his bicycle against the wall, and came in.

"*Salut, Roy! . . . Salut Périneau! . . .* Do you mean to say you're not drunk yet? It's nearly five!"

"All in good time, young man. All in good time. . . . I was just saying to Evariste. . . . What was it, now? . . ."

Liberge ordered his drink and sat down. Périneau seemed to have lost the thread of his discourse and the conversation became desultory, while the clock ticked lazily on. Liberge was the first to think of going, but then he had four miles to ride in the dark, and with a lamp that wasn't much good.

Evariste Roy went next. The darkness didn't bother him. He didn't need to see. He'd known that bit of road for over sixty-five years, had known it long before they'd put this modern tarmac down which made the horses slip in wet weather.

Hallo! The window of the room upstairs was open. The light was on inside and the wind was blowing the curtain about.

The old man didn't quicken his pace. He went through the gate into the yard. The light was on in the kitchen too. Passing the window, he looked in. No one there.

He fetched his two milk-pails and the stable lantern. Etienne might still be at Fontenay, but Joséphine at any rate ought to have started milking, yet there was no glow of light coming from the cowshed. He struck a match, which the wind blew out, then a second, then a third, and this time the lantern was lit.

The cows stirred when he pushed at the door. But why did the door resist him? He pushed harder and forced his way in. The door slammed behind him as if there was someone leaning against it. There was! At least there was a human body hanging from a hook in the roof just inside the door.

The old man wasn't afraid of death or of the dead. He put down his lantern and felt one of Etienne's hands. Then he muttered:

"He's gone . . . *L'est passé. . .*"

The hand was quite cold. The little ladder they used for the apple trees in the orchard was lying on the ground.

The old man stood for quite a moment wondering what to do. Then he picked up his lantern, pushed the body aside so that he could open the door, and made for the house.

In the kitchen, he called:

"Anybody about?"

The fire was still burning in the stove. On the table stood an empty decanter and near it two gold-rimmed liqueur glasses and a claret glass.

"Anybody about?"

Silence. Ought he to go straight to the village to give the alarm? No. He first went upstairs, after shaking off his sabots so as not to leave marks on the polished wood. Splinters of wood. A chest of drawers lying on its face.

A gust of wind blew out his lantern, but that didn't matter as the electric light was burning. Three bodies lay on the floor. There was blood all over the place, not only on the floor, but even on the flowered wallpaper.

A heavy spanner was lying on the floor near the unknown man who had cycled over from Fontenay.

"Hallo! . . . Hallo! . . . Is that the *Gendarmerie* at Maillezais? . . . Here you are, Monsieur Roy. . . ."

"Say it for me, will you? You know I can't get any sense out of those machines."

"What am I to say?"

"Tell 'em to come."

"Hallo! Is the sergeant there? . . . Oh, he's not back yet? . . . Will you tell him from Monsieur Roy to come to *Gros-Noyer* at once. . . . At once, yes . . . I don't know, but it seems it's something serious. . . ."

The postmistress hung up the receiver and leant over the counter.

"What's happened, Monsieur Roy?"

"Who can tell? . . . Are they coming?"

"At once. They'll pick up the sergeant on the way. They're bound to meet him as he came from here."

"Good."

Before going back to the farm he went into the inn.

"What is it this time?"

"Perhaps it'll be a glass of rum. . . . On a day like this. . . ."

"Not feeling too good?"

"As far as I'm concerned I can't say as how there's anything wrong. . . . But there's been things happening. . . ."

"What?"

"Oh . . . things. . . ."

He idly watched a game of cards as he drank down his rum. Then he shook himself.

"I'll be off now."

He got to the farm at the same time as the gendarmes, who had come in a taxi from Maillezais.

"You'll see," he told them. "Wait a minute—perhaps we'd better begin upstairs."

Three months had gone by when *La Mère aux Chats*, now more bloated than ever, received a letter. The envelope bore a stamp of the Republic of Panama.

All the newspapers had spread themselves over the murders at the farm, referring to them as *The Massacre of Gros-Noyer*.

Newspapermen had come to Saint-Ouen to interview the old gipsy woman and take photographs of her.

"What do you want me to say? . . . What do I know about it?"

Her eyes weren't much use to her these days, and it was a neighbour who read the letter to her, a man whom everyone called the Professor.

"Since then I've had plenty of ups and downs. One day, if I have the luck to see you again, I'll tell you all I've been through."

"Anyhow, things are all right now. I'm in partnership with a chap and we're making good money."

The letter was from Justin. Old Mme Violet could speak quite

openly to the Professor, who was a man who knew as much about the seamy side of life as anybody, and, knowing her son as she did, she remarked drily:

"He doesn't say how . . ."

"No. . . . But listen to this: . . . *we're making good money . . . I didn't know your address, and I couldn't get hold of you through the rest of the band, as I don't know what's become of them either. . . .*"

"There's not many of them left," she interposed once again.

"*Just by chance I ran into someone who had landed from a French ship, and he told me that Joséphine. . . .*"

There were blots on the paper, as the pen had spluttered. The letter was most likely written in a bar, which wasn't surprising to anybody who knew Justin. What could he be doing in the Republic of Panama?

"*I didn't like to write to Joséphine, considering the kind of life he told me she was leading. . . . As a matter of fact I always thought she'd finish up like that . . .*

"*One day I heard that a chap I knew was going back to France. I'd done him a good turn and in exchange I asked him to take home some money for you: . . . He was a good sort, so it seemed quite safe. . . .*"

"He doesn't say how much," said *La Mère aux Chats* dreamily, "but I suppose it's those sixty thousand francs."

"No he doesn't. . . . But he adds:

"*As things are now I daresay it would be just as well not to . . .*"

The old woman nodded.

Not to put in a claim. . . . Obviously! . . . How could you explain things like that to those dirty gendarmes? . . .

"You must admit, Professor, that I don't have much luck. And at my age you can do with a bit of money. . . . All the same it was nice of Justin to think of it. He's got a good heart has Justin. . . . As for that old man . . . What's his name? . . . The name of a king, wasn't it? . . . Oh yes. Roy. . . . How silly of me! It was my daughter's name too! But there you are! I can't remember anything these days. . . . So it's the old man who comes into everything? . . ."

They were sitting on soap boxes, and the Professor, who had no

shirt under his jacket, gravely explained to her that Etienne Roy had died intestate, and, as his daughter had died intestate too, all the property would revert to his father.

At *Gros-Noyer* the old man has taken a servant and as she's only thirty tongues are already wagging.

Every Saturday he harnesses La Grise, daughter of Grisette, daughter of the first La Grise, the mare Etienne had bought at La Roche-sur-Yon to take him to Fontenay on market days.

As he's old, he goes, not to the *Colonnes* but to the *Trois Pigeons*.

He won't have any young labourers on the farm, unmarried ones, that is, who sleep in. He's afraid of complications with Marie. He prefers those who have homes of their own.

He's seventy-two yet no one would be surprised to learn one day that Marie was in the family way.

Like the earth, he has an eternity before him.

